

A black and white photograph of a group of people, likely a BDSM community, wearing various leather restraints, collars, and chains. The scene is dimly lit, with strong highlights on the subjects' skin and the metallic elements of their gear. The composition is dense, with figures overlapping and creating a sense of intimacy and shared experience.

# *cine* ACTION

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

NO. 32 FALL 1993 \$7

RACE-ING  
HOME:

RACE AND  
CULTURAL  
IDENTITY



**FRONT COVER:** Isaac Julien's  
*The Attendant*

**ABOVE:** Deborah Gee's  
*Slaying The Dragon*

**BACK COVER:** Graham Greene in  
Richard Bugajski's *Clearcut*

**STILLS:** British Film Institute,  
Frameline, The National Film  
Board, Women Make Movies and  
V Tape. Special thanks to  
Cinemathèque Ontario for their  
generosity.

## **THE COLLECTIVE**

Kass Banning  
Scott Forsyth  
Florence Jacobowitz  
Richard Lippe  
Janine Marchessault  
Susan Morrison  
Robin Wood

## **DESIGN**

Julie Jenkinson  
with assistance from  
Roger Babcock

*CineAction* is published three  
times a year by the *CineAction*  
collective.

Single copy \$7. Subscriptions:  
Canada and U.S.: 3 issues/\$18  
(individual), 3 issues/\$35  
(institutions); overseas add \$15  
Mailing Address: 40 Alexander  
St. Apt. 705, Toronto,  
Canada M4Y 1B5.

Manuscripts (typed, double  
spaced) are welcomed. They  
should be accompanied by a  
stamped, self-addressed return  
envelope. The editors do not  
accept responsibility for their  
loss.

The opinions expressed in  
individual articles are not  
necessarily endorsed by the  
editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright  
September 1993 by *CineAction*  
and may not be reproduced  
without permission.

This issue was generously  
assisted by a grant from the  
Ontario Arts Council.

*CineAction* is owned and  
operated by *CineAction*, a  
collective for the advancement  
of film studies. *CineAction* is a  
non-profit organization.

ISSN 0326-9366  
Printed and bound in Canada



|   |            |  |
|---|------------|--|
| <b>This Ain't No Flavour</b>  | <b>2.</b>  | <b>Kass Banning &amp;<br/>David Fujiwara</b> |
| <b>Confessions of a Snow Queen:<br/>Notes on the Making of <i>The Attendant</i></b>                                     | <b>5.</b>  | <b>Isaac Julien</b>                          |
| <b>From Stereotype to Discourse:<br/>Some Methodological Reflexions on<br/>Racism in the Media</b>                      | <b>10.</b> | <b>Robert Stam</b>                           |
| <b>Between The Borders of Cultural Identity:<br/>Atom Egoyan's <i>Calendar</i></b>                                      | <b>30.</b> | <b>Ron Burnett</b>                           |
| <b>Antillean Cinema in the Absence of Ruins:<br/>The Case of Felix de Rooy</b>  | <b>35.</b> | <b>Reece Auguiste</b>                        |
| <b>Blood, Vengeance &amp; The Anxious Liberal:<br/>Natives and Non-Natives in Recent Movies</b>                         | <b>43.</b> | <b>Deborah Root</b>                          |
| <b>Dark and Lovely Too:<br/>Black Gay Men in Independent Film</b>   | <b>51.</b> | <b>Kobena Mercer</b>                         |
| <b>Now You Can See It:<br/>The Liberal Aesthetic &amp; Racial<br/>Representation in <i>The Crying Game</i></b>          | <b>63.</b> | <b>Darrell Moore</b>                         |
| <b>Don't Go to Dat Place and Fool Around<br/>Like Rich Girls: Black Canadian Women<br/>Filmmakers and Video Artists</b> | <b>68.</b> | <b>Gabrielle Hezekiah</b>                    |
| <b><i>Small Pleasures</i>: Large Rewards</b>  | <b>77.</b> | <b>Xiaoping Li</b>                           |
| <b>Servants and Slaves:<br/>Brown Persons in Classical<br/>Hollywood Cinema</b>   | <b>81.</b> | <b>Robin Wood</b>                            |

This Ain't  
No

flavour

Whispers of Kisses





**T**his issue of *CineAction* on race/home/identity and its allied concepts has been prompted by the proliferation of recent films, writings and events, both popular, and academic, emanating from the local and elsewhere. This productivity has centred on issues of "difference," "multiculturalism," "race and representation" and "identity." While existing canons of cultural practice, theory, and criticism have come under intense scrutiny, the upside in this "rupture" is the dizzying sense that new directions have been forged and shall not, as the old leftie anthem goes, "be moved." In the last five years, particularly here in Toronto, something has happened, and it ain't no "flavour of the month." The manner in which contestation has been played out in different registers, across different borders, intraracial and interracial, is, to say the least, monumental. These recent intense "happenings" and enhanced dialogue are partially due to generational and immigration patterns and simple down-home racism. Older folks haven't negotiated class mobility as successfully as their children's generation — mostly "emerging" twenty-and-thirty-somethings have accessed the cultural terrain.

Many of these shifts have been motivated by the re-emergence of identity politics (an intensified global phenomenon) and its more extreme manifestation, nationalism. While in most intellectual circles identity politics is considered *déclassé*, with its fetishistic celebration of difference, a counter narrative which cannot accommodate difference or contradiction, it does, at the same time, empower and sustain individuals. The upside of this single-mindedness is that it generates the initial impetus for social movements—things get done. So goes the paradox.

Just as the origin of cinema coincides with the heyday of imperialism, the articles that follow conjure exciting new models for considering the cinema and its racialized effects. Symptomatic of the uncertainty of these times,

putting identity, racial and otherwise in question, they assert, surprisingly, the thrill of possibility. Interrogating the "difficult" (sometimes painful) traversed arenas of racial contestation, these writings are unabashedly "out," opening up new discursive spaces. They manage to bypass high moral ground while negotiating an ethic, approximating what Stuart Hall has so eloquently called for.

The recent rush to "discover" and excavate race and representation by concerned intellectuals (both subaltern and white) and funding institutions is unprecedented in Canada. Although timely and necessary, this paroxysm of interest and attendant institutionalization of diversity, regardless of consuming consensual relations, belies an undercurrent of anxiety. While *CineAction* might share enthusiasm and an abiding political commitment, the following issue shares no interest in "multiculti" special issue celebrations initiated (or paid for) by the "heritage" exigencies of the state. *CineAction* is no newcomer to debates on race and representation and we seek to continue this forum. In this sense, then, this issue is not special, while its content, the illuminating pieces collected here, remains resoundingly so. Race is no "issue."

Kass Banning & David Fujiwara

*Special thanks to Pat Banning for her assistance.*

*I would like to wish Janine Marchessault the best of luck in her move to Montreal. A comrade in provocativeness, her contribution as a member of the *CineAction* collective over the years has been invaluable. Her insight, humour and commitment will be greatly missed. (K.B.)*



**A**t the time of publication Canada's most cherished film critic, Jay Scott died suddenly. The news of Jay's death brings into focus all our loss. He'll be missed as a mentor, as a comrade in wickedness, as a dear acquaintance. As a friend once remarked, he was, to use a cliché, a "people person." It somehow fits. He was a revered first-rate writer, and person. Like countless others, here and around the globe, I am grateful for having known him. We shall miss him.

K.B.



# confessions



## of a Snow Queen:

Director's Notes on the Making of *The Attendant*

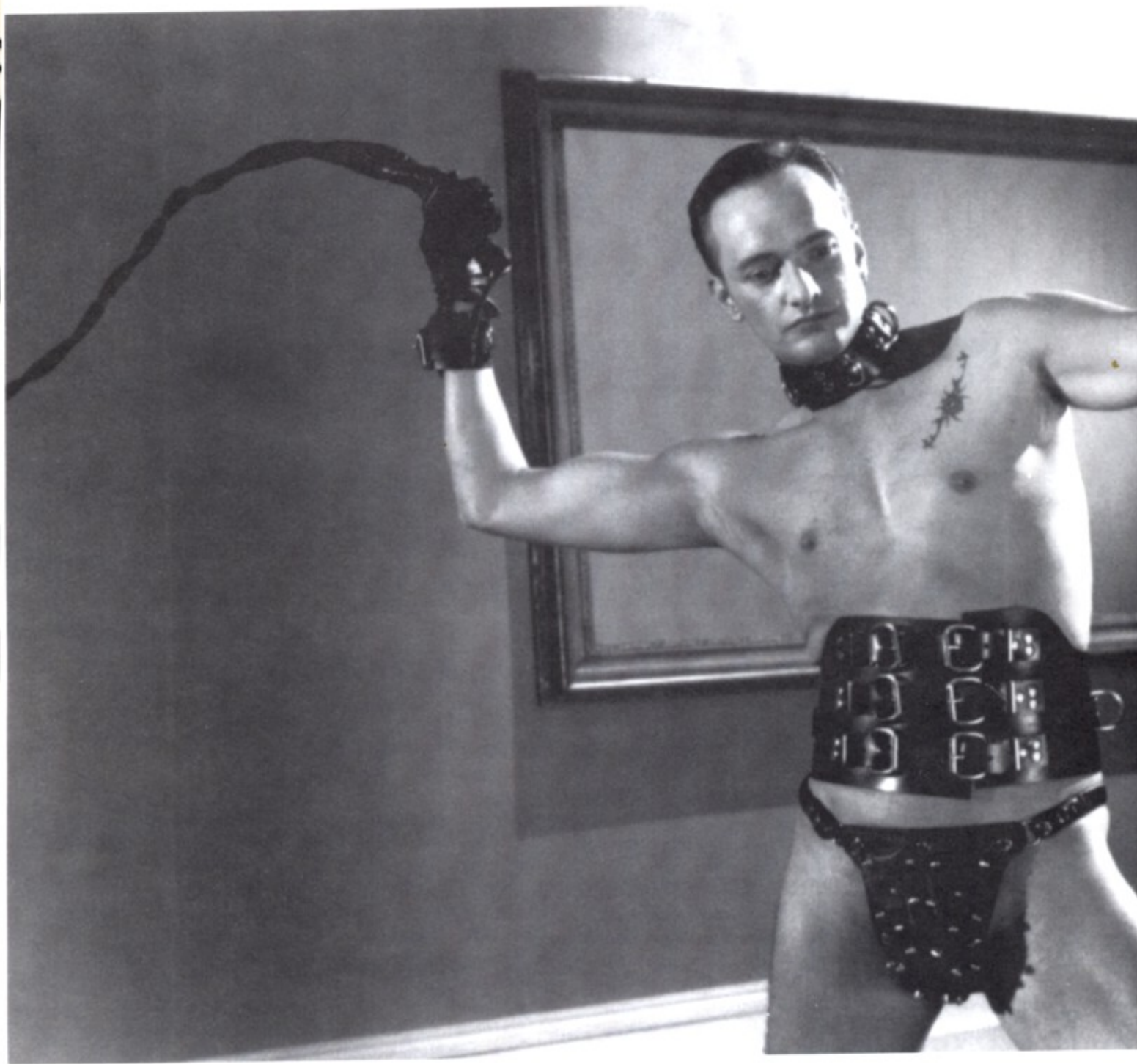
by Isaac Julien

The setting for my film *The Attendant* doesn't stem from the subject in question, a black museum attendant, but rather, its point of departure is from a painting by F. A. Baird, a white French painter, who created a famous nineteenth century painting entitled "Scene on the Coast of Africa." I first came across this painting in the Wilberforce Museum in Hull, established as an anti-slavery museum in honour of Wilberforce, a famous white abolitionist who worked all his life against slavery in Jamaica and England.

The painting contains several *tableaux* that narrate the history of slavery and exploitation during colonial expansion. The painting depicts the buying

and the selling of black slaves, black men being whipped by black men, under the order of the white master - bartering over black bodies. The images in this painting signify the sad and tragic symbolic story of enslavement, the fears and fantasies projected on the Other in the practices of human brutality, ultimately for financial profit. This painting, "Scene on the Coast of Africa," would have probably made the white European bourgeoisie question the violent enactments of the "civilizing mission" of industrial capitalist expansion which is haunted by the traumatic and ineradicable memory of slave imperialism.

The images and signs of "whips" and "chains" in the representational strategies and practices of S/M







in my film have been borrowed from this colonial iconography of the past. Its re-fashioned apparatus, (i.e., rubberization, polished surfaces, latex, and polished metal) becomes a sexualized stylization of fetish coding for the queer body fetish — iron becomes rubber. This past of a slave imperialist iconography is reappropriated and repositioned as part of the design for a new transgressive queer body culture. To try to “fix” a queer S/M practice which borrows these signs (of whips and chains) is to collapse them as a continuation of this colonial project, and to mistake the “theatre of S/M” as the desire of a politically correct manifesto devoid of fantasy. Desire and fantasy are often transgressive in these sexualized ritual acts of S/M because of the way fantasy structures the scene. So could not the fetish slave band mimicking the metal collars worn by black slaves which enacts this colonial memory be read as something else, namely, the unspeakable masochistic desire for sexual domination? It’s not the same “then” as it is “now” because surely in this post-colonial moment, black queers should have the choice whether or not we want to perform the roles of “slaves” or “masters” in the realm of desire and sexual fantasy in sexual practices. So, for instance, if a black gay man was to participate in such an act, for sexual pleasure, would not “the representation” of interracial S/M be read as a parody in the queer context of consensual S/M by its willing black participant? Or would he/she be moralistically read into the cheap sociology of a pathological, racial self-hating discourse? Or, alternatively, could the representation of interracial S/M be read as a practice of racial and sexual dynamics, which scopically displays the codes of a Fanonian master/slave dialectic—stimulating a transgressive simulacrum in fantasy, which both parodies and disrupts the codes of societal racial conventions of power? Or could the representation interracial S/M be read in its clichéd reverence for formal power as what the fetish exposes in an S/M context? As Pat Califia has stated, “the staging in an S/M context [of] the uniforms and the roles and dialogue become a parody of authority — a challenge to it, a recognition of its secret, sexual nature.”<sup>1</sup>

These are just some of the questions I asked myself when making *The Attendant* (I’m thinking particularly of the attendant’s own uniform). The other themes that influenced me making the film were sex and aging in the era of AIDS. Had not the 80’s and the 90’s through the AIDS crisis made us more aware of our own “death drives” and our bodily limits too, hence the rise of S/M practice? Does S/M not make the image of safer sex sexier? (Madonna seemed to think so in her rather tame book *SEX*).

In making *The Attendant* I thought through these questions, not because I was an S/M practitioner myself, but because if I had any wish to become one in the near future, this choice would have certain ramifications for my own sense of self, of identity, in relation to the sexual construction of the black male body — the “baggage” of slavery. Also, it would presently under British law, since “The Spanner case” (1992), possibly be an illegal sexual act with the likelihood of imprisonment. Well, I suppose it made it a more sexually transgressive act (I’m thinking particularly of Genet here, but only academically). The “Spanner case” has made S/M into a question of basic civil rights in relationship to the policing of sexual practices in the gay community. It became embarrassed by its own identity/Other. In turn, the very notion of respectability was being used against gays by the law and thus undermined its queer citizenship from within. Wasn’t this attack indeed a direct backlash against gay people which comes out of the AIDS crisis, I asked myself.

<sup>1</sup> Pat Califia, “Unravelling the Sexual Fringe: A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality,” in *The Advocate*, 27/12/1979 and Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction* (Boston: Alyson Publication, 1988). Also quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*, (Routledge, 1985), p. 238.

## The Spanner Case

John Savage writes in the  
*Sunday Observer Magazine*.

On December 19th, 1990, in a judgment described variously as "illiberal nonsense" (*Times*), as setting "disturbing precedents" (*The Independent*) and as "wide and worrying" (*Liberty*, civil liberties group), five middle-aged gay men were convicted at the Old Bailey under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, for assault and aiding and abetting assault.

What they actually did was to engage in homosexual, sado-masochistic sexual practices which, although on occasions extreme and certainly not to many people's taste, were consensual - i.e., there was no coercion involved and, until the judgment, the practice was not thought to be illegal. However, in what is now recognized as a test case, Judge James Rant ruled that consent was no defence to the charge of assault in this case, and that the acts were injurious to the public good. The principal precedent was an obscure 1934 case, where a man was found guilty of assault when he caned a woman 'for the purposes of sexual gratification.'<sup>2</sup>

Lord Lane, the Lord Chief Justice who heard the court of appeal for the Spanner case in March 1992 concluded, "The satisfying of the sexual libido does not come within the category of 'good' reason."<sup>3</sup> It has been said, and here I quote from a brilliant essay by Anne McClintock on S/M, performative practices of the trial and the ritualistic staging of S/M have similar codes for different ends: In terms of the role of the (straight) Dominatrix and Judge:

..."Fetish elements are common to both: theatrical costumery, stage, gavels, whips, wigs, handcuffs...the interrogation, denials, the confession. ...Warnings are given, sentence is pronounced and execution takes place. Only then is the logic of pleasure and punishment reversed: the trial displays illicit pleasure for power and punishment; S/M displays illicit punishment for pleasure and power. The trial exists to produce the sentence of rational Truth, while in S/M Truth becomes orgasm, and the word is made flesh. S/M thus emerges as a private parody of the public trial: public punishment converted to private pleasure...."<sup>4</sup>

This is just one of the several themes that influenced my making of *The Attendant*. The Spanner Case Ruling, as it is now called, has effectively tightened legal control over the body; but as Richard Davenport-Hines has written in *Sex, Death and Punishment*, in the past the construction of English sexuality since the Renaissance has always used contagion fears (similar to the current moral panic around sex in the AIDS crisis), where sexuality is regulated, eroticism repressed and social conformity equated with health; so the policing of S/M sex should come as no surprise in Britain. But if this is the case where are black gay men to stand regarding this? Do we revert to a similar kind of moralism, i.e., black gay men should not practise S/M, or are the privately silenced questions of race and slavery to remain always in erasure when discussing or depicting representations of S/M in the public discourse about queerness and thus be kept in the closet?

The epistemology of the closet is one of the central themes of *The Attendant*: Black popular culture like white popular culture wants its subjects to remain in it. But for the closet to function in black society you always need an alibi, a marriage and in the case of closeted black men, a heterosexual woman is used to complete the alibi. So the black woman in *The Attendant* symbolically plays this role. She is the accomplice, the knowing participant and partner, as the unspoken agreement is made and sealed in a hetero-kiss. As a conservator in the museum she too has an ambivalent, but intimate relationship to the construction of whiteness and art in high modernist culture. She knows she is ironically placed: her relationship to the history of Western art would have been a well-read one. After all she does attentively and carefully clean nineteenth century frames for a living. Sometimes she caresses the heads of white dead kings. High culture is the living dead of whiteness.

The opera in *The Attendant's* fantasy sequences situates the conservator as a kind of dominatrix figure; as she applauds the attendant's singing her revenge and pathos is projected onto her husband's fate because she resents being his alibi. The rhythm of the whip lashed in a forlorn fashion is heard in the rhythm of her clapping. Where there is a closet there will always be bitterness and abjectness due to the repressed desires of black societal conservative family values which produce silence at any cost.



## The Silence Of Whiteness In Black Queer Practice

One of the unspoken economies of interracial desire at work in the signifying practices of gay cultural production of, say, the photographs of the late Robert Mapplethorpe or the photographs of, jointly authored, the late Rotimi Fani-kayode and his white lover Alex Hirst, or the black gay photography of Lyle Ashton-Harris, or Isaac Julien's producer Mark Nash, who is my lover and collaborator on *Looking for Langston*, or Marlon Riggs, the director of *Tongues Untied*, is that we have all been snow queens with the exception of Mapplethorpe, who was one hell of a dinge queen! That's not to say that the economy of racial desire is always fixed in these directions, but in this culture we have all grown up as snow queens, straights, as well as whites (queers).

The black queer snow queen draws to his or her attention the way in which black desire for the white subject in the scopical register does not necessarily mean that one believes one's self to be pathologized around one's own racial identity. In fact, the upholding of black identity as it is culturally constructed in its essentialist mode is dependent upon an active avoidance of that psychic reality of desire. However fixed the ideas about racial differences are in the essentializing practices of black and white subjects in their everyday transactions, they are all mediated by the sexual and racial anxiety which is internal to every person/subject — the constitutive sexual dependence upon the Other, which is based on the consistent denial of the Other within ourselves. Therefore, the Other in Marlon Riggs powerful video *Tongues Untied* is the "white gay subject." He explains how he was saved by a white boy with Blue Eyes, this then becomes a curse. Here, the epistemology of interracial desire becomes a meta-discourse in the form of "gossip."

"Oh did you know that she has a white boyfriend still, so how can she talk about black men loving black men as *the* revolutionary act." To have remained closeted on the subject of interracial desire has its dangers for all snow queens. I am not talking about these questions solely in relation to the pathologization of interracial desire as constructed as objectification in *Jungle Fever*, but rather of interracial desire as a transgressive act of affection. Trust is the bonding necessary in interracial desire, as in S/M.

## The Attendant

This video/film was made for Time-code, a Pan-European art series, which has been running for several years. All the pieces in this series have utilized the newest forms of video computer technology; in *The Attendant*'s case it is digital D1. There is no spoken dialogue in the film, a condition of all the films in the series. The theme this year was called "Double Lives."

To return to my own film is to enter into the historical construction of the Museum as the bastion, the high citadel, of colonial artifacts. In this post-colonial moment it is now black attendants (the unspoken subject/object of most museum installations) who always guard the works of high art and colonial artifacts as well as nineteenth century paintings.

Inspired by the painting "Scene on the Coast of Africa" the gaze and our scopical relations are re-positioned through the eyes and fantasies of that marginally constructed subject of the museum, the black closeted attendant. Following his gaze, we notice how the looking relations become tantalized by his closet Queer desire.

The auditory pleasures of aural voyeurism are explored in *The Attendant* as the attendant remembers his past as an opera singer. Here is evoked another scene on the coast of Africa. Purcell's "Lament of Dido" (Dido is abandoned by Aeneas) is performed to the transgressive, unspeakable tale of interracial desire; in Greek mythology (The Odyssey) the setting for the opera is Carthage, so Dido was more than likely black. Here the gender roles are switched and abjection becomes the attendant's new identity as he laments the passing fantasy of his white male visitor and his own mortality.

But humour is never far away from this abjection.<sup>5</sup> In *The Attendant* the irony is always evinced by cameos from Stuart Hall and Hanif Kureishi, as well as Jimmy Somerville as a typecast Cupid yet again. Joy is never very far away from *jouissance* as mourning is never very far away from abjection. Our black queer bodies become our sites for resistance.

*This talk was given at The Queer Sites Conference in Toronto, April 1993.*

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in John Savage, "Sex and Martyrdom" in the *Sunday Observer Magazine*, Nov. 1992, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock, "Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power" in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* eds. Pamela Church Gibson, Roma Gibson, (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> For theories of abjection please see Craig Houser's "I, Abject" in *Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York, Whitney Museum, 1992) p. 85. He writes, "Julien uses the abject identification of S/M and bondage to subvert the racist homophobic ideology of British culture." My use of abjection here follows that of Judith Butler's, rather than Julia Kristeva's.

# FROM STEREOTYPE



***Methodological Reflexions***



# TO DISCOURSE:



**By Robert Stam**

***On Racism In The Media***

*I would like to thank Ella Shohat for generously allowing me to include passages from the "shared territory" of our forthcoming book.*

Contemporary racism can be seen as the practical/discursive residue or precipitate of **Colonialism**, the process by which the European powers implanted settlements in distant territories, ultimately reaching a position of economic, military, political and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa and the Americas. While not a uniquely western phenomenon, and while not limited to the colonial situation (anti-semitism being a case in point), racism has historically been both an ally and the partial product of colonialism. The most obvious victims of racism, not coincidentally, are those whose identity was forged within the colonial cauldron: Africans, Asians and Native Americans, as well as those displaced by colonialism: blacks in the U.S. and South Africa, Asians and West Indians in Great Britain and Arabs in France. Colonialist culture imagined, and helped construct, a European sense of ontological superiority to "lesser breeds without the law." Within the "hierarchy of races," as Gilbert Murray put it, some nations "will direct and rule the others, and the lower work of the world will be done by the lower breeds of men."<sup>1</sup> Such imperious *pronunciamientos* of axiomatic superiority exemplify Albert Memmi's definition of racism as "the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and at his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privilege or aggression."<sup>2</sup> Racism as an attitude is thus anchored in material structures and embedded in historical relations of power. It is above all a social relation, not reducible to the ravings of pathological maniacs. In fact, Memmi's definition, premised on a kind of one-on-one encounter between racist and victim, does not fully account for more indirect, submerged, even "democratic" forms of racism. Since racism is a complex hierarchical system, a structured ensemble of social and institutional practices and discourses, individuals do not have to actively practise racism to be its beneficiaries. Racism is both individual and systemic, interwoven into the fabric of the social system as well as of the psyche. It is at once grindingly quotidian and maddeningly abstract. Rather than being merely attitudinal, it is an historically contingent, institutional and discursive apparatus linked to the drastically unequal distribution of resources and opportunities.

A recent "Tom Brokaw Report" (April 1993) on the subject of immigration reflects the ways in which racist and colonialist discourse subtly permeates the contemporary media. Sutured into the panoptical gaze of the border police, we accompany official efforts to catch "illegal aliens coming from Mexico." In the greenish light of surveillance cameras, we see them making their way over fences, across highways, through cracks. The portrayal suggests a kind of ineradicable vermin who proliferate like mice and are just as difficult to stomp out. One of "them" appears briefly, not to explain his perspective but only to say that they will

keep coming back, that arrest and expulsion is no obstacle. There is no historicization, no explanation that the entire area was once part of Mexico, and that many Chicanos and Mexicans regard it as part of a transborder nation.

We then move to New York, where a black Dominican medic reports on the high levels of crime in the neighbourhood he serves; he calls for more "selective" immigration. After hearing about the "bad" ethnics, predictably black and latino, we meet the "good ethnics," this time Russian Jews who work hard, do not complain, and who are deeply appreciative of America's gifts to them. The same signs shift valence according to an ethnic hierarchy. Both Dominicans and Russians are shown dancing, for example, but only with the Russians does the voice-over "anchor" the dancing as a sign of "*joie de vivre*." Then we meet another "good ethnic," a Korean businessman who "teaches discipline" to young blacks, who praise the Korean for improving their neighbourhood. The Koreans, we are told, work long hours, respect their elders, and get ahead, but their success causes resentment. (Given the Los Angeles rebellions, we suspect that blacks and latinos might be the resentful ones referred to). Three white male "experts" address us: one, a liberal, argues for tolerance, the other two argue for greater restrictiveness. The few black voices in the program speak up, not for their community but rather for other communities (the Koreans) or for stricter immigration policy; no one speaks up for the blacks. Not a word about racism, about widely divergent histories and relations to colonialism, capitalism, slavery, immigration. But why does this scenario seem so familiar? A moment's reflection reminds us that we are hearing echoes of the 19th century "hierarchy of the races" theory developed by such thinkers as Hegel, Gobineau, and Renan, now embedded as "culture of poverty" ideology. For Gobineau, blacks are on the lowest rung, incapable of development, while the yellow race is superior to the black, but still passive and susceptible to despotism. The white race, characterized by intelligence, orderliness and a taste for liberty, occupies the top position. For Renan too, blacks (along with indigenous peoples) are at the bottom, with Asians as an "intermediate race," and white Europeans are again positioned at the top. In the Brokaw program, the qualities posited have changed (the Asians are no longer passive but rather hardworking; Jews, once the object of anti-semitic hostility, have been promoted), yet the basic hierarchizing mechanism remains intact. White superiority is not so much asserted as assumed and normalized — whites are the objective ones, the experts, the uncontroversial ones, those who cause no problems, those who judge.

In a systemically racist society no one is exempt from a hegemonic racist discourse, including the victims of racism. Racism also "trickles down" laterally; oppressed people can relay the hegemonic system by scapegoating one another "sideways," ultimately benefitting those at the top of the hierarchy. Since racism is a discourse as well as a praxis, a member of an oppressed group can also adopt the



oppressor's discourse: the anti-black black, the self-hating Jew. Samuel Fuller's *Shock Corridor* dramatically stages this phenomenon in the form of an insane black character who fancies himself the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. The German film *Weininger's Night*, similarly anatomizes Jewish self-hatred in its study of the historical figure of Otto Weininger, a German Jew who regarded Jews as the incarnation of evil.<sup>3</sup> Thus discourse and ethnic affiliation can split apart under the extreme pressures of a racist or anti-semitic society.

If racism generates contradictions in the victims of racism, it is no less contradictory on its own terms, often masking an attraction to its own hated object. Obsessive denigration can mask a perverse identification: repulsion can overlay desire. Ernst Renan, the passionate anti-semitic, devoted his life to studying the same Jewish religious culture that he supposedly despised.<sup>4</sup> The colonialist racist, also, often imagines himself as besieged by an almost irresistible overwhelming attraction. Here is an anonymous writer speaking of the life of the British in India:

It is in the religious atmosphere above all of India that the Englishman feels himself to be moving in a mysterious, unrealized world, and this feeling is the essence of romance. He does well to resist the seduction which this atmosphere exercises upon those too curious about it...The English in India are wise to surround themselves, as far as they can, with English atmosphere, and to defend themselves from the magic of the land by sport, games, clubs and the chatter of fresh-imported girls, and by fairly regular attendance at church.<sup>5</sup>

The almost comic proposals for maintaining one's Englishness in the face of temptation, reminiscent of a headmaster's advice to boys on how to avoid masturbation, is expressed in a language of psychic defence against a threatening hypersexuality, even though the subject of fear is religion.

While ambivalence has been usefully discussed in psychoanalytic terms, it is also important to historicize the notion. At times, racism can constitute a disguised form of genealogical self-rejection. White European workers in the U.S., for example, came to construct the black population as otherized incarnations of a permissive, erotic pre-industrial past both scorned and longed for, "Englishmen and profit-minded settlers in America," as George Rawick puts it, "met the West African as a reformed sinner meets a comrade of his previous debaucheries."<sup>6</sup> The practice of "blacking up" for rebellious and riotous actions (directed both against authority and sometimes against blacks) encodes this ambivalence: blacked up maskers "both admired what they imagined blackness to symbolize and hated themselves for doing so."<sup>7</sup> The smearing of soot over the body was the height of "polymorphous perversity, an infantile playing with excrement or dirt...the polar opposite of the anal retentiveness usually associated with accumulating capitalist and protestant cultures."<sup>8</sup>

It is sometimes more revealing, then, to analyze the stereotyper than to deconstruct the stereotype. Racial attitudes are multiform, fissured, even schizophrenic. Europeans and Euro-Americans with multicultural bellies, full of tacos, falafel and chow mein, sometimes have monocultural minds. Racial attitudes are contradictory, the point being not that these "contradictions" offer solace for the victims of racism, but only that the struggle against racism must take heterogeneity into account. In white-dominated societies we find a kind of schizophrenia: the same dominant society that adores African-American celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Whitney Houston, Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall expresses rampant paranoia toward the so-called "underclass" of inner-city youth. In Latin America, the same white elites that proudly invoke their "mestizo" culture steadfastly refuse to empower the mestizo majority. Thus very real cultural "victories" can mask political defeats.

Racism often travels in gangs, accompanied by its buddies sexism, classism and homophobia. Systems of social stratification thus get superimposed on and intersect with one another, in ways both contradictory and mutually reinforcing. Racism can be virulent and explicit, or subtle and camouflaged. As a historical product, the causes of racism are at once economic (as a scapegoating mechanism linked to economic resentment or opportunism), psychological (having to do with the projections of insecure, ambivalent or panicked identities) and discursive (my focus here). Racism offers its own perverse "pleasures": an easy, unearned feeling of superiority, of imagining oneself innocent, of cementing group identity on the fragile basis of arbitrary antipathy. It is these "pleasures" that explain why racism can occasionally go against the racist's own self-interest, as when Euro-Americans reject programs beneficial to them because they might also help African-Americans. Although racism has a discursive dimension, I would add, it is not just a discourse — a police prod is not a discourse — even though discourses may impinge on the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Memmi, *Dominated Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> The film was based on a play by Yehoshua Sobol, entitled *Motzel Yehudi* (Death of a Jew), performed in and outside of Israel in 1988.

<sup>4</sup> See Todotov, *On Human Diversity*.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> See George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* quoted in David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Roediger, p. 119.

representations and public perceptions of how police prods are used.

Within the transformational grammar of colonial-style racism, several mechanisms stand out: 1) the positing of deficiency, i.e., the habit of projecting the colonized or the racially stigmatized as deficient in terms of European norms, as lacking in order, intelligence, sexual modesty, material civilization, even history. Racism also involves 2) the mania for hierarchy, for ranking peoples and artifacts, not only for placing Europeans above non-Europeans but also for creating imaginary hierarchies among non-European groups (Zulus over Bushmen) and cultural practices: farming over nomadism, brick over thatch, opera over jazz, melody over percussion. Racism also involves 3) blaming the victim, the process which blames Native Americans for their own dispossession, the inner city for its poverty. Racism also entails 4) the systematic devaluation of life, which can take the form of open calls for genocide, as in these words by L. Frank Baum (the author of *The Wizard of Oz*): "The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they should die than live the miserable wretches that they are."<sup>9</sup>

The devaluation of life was classically and satirically expressed in Huck Finn's response to the question whether anyone was hurt in a steamboat accident: "No Ma'am, killed a nigger." Racism in this sense operates less on the cerebral level of opinion than on the visceral level of ethnic solidarity and us/them antipathy, the pronominal level of an assumed "we." The contemporary first-world mass media constantly devalorize the lives of people of colour, while regarding Euro-American life as sacrosanct, as when the talismanic phrase "saving American lives" is invoked as a pretext for military incursions in Third World countries. The same regime that devalorizes life then projects this devaluation onto those whose lives have been devalorized. In the film *Hearts and Minds*, General Westmoreland, the chief administrator of massive killing during the Vietnam war, sums up Oriental philosophy in the phrase "life has no value." (His words are juxtaposed with Vietnamese parents weeping inconsolably over their lost children.)<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, liberal discourse, by focussing on the moral dilemmas of the dominant group rather than on structures of oppression, also devalorizes Third World life.<sup>11</sup> Thus the PBS documentary (*Dear America: Letters from Home*)<sup>12</sup> laments the "tragedy" of the Vietnam war, but only in relation to Americans. The final intertitle registers the more than 50,000 American war dead, but passes over the 2 million Vietnamese war dead. Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), while also critical of the "madness" of the war, never lends human depth to the Vietnamese themselves. Many Vietnam films, such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) treat the war as a domestic tragedy;

the real battle takes place within the (white) American soul, a logomachia within imperial culture. During the Persian Gulf War, the mass media constantly framed debates and channeled empathy through a Eurocentric grid. When Ted Koppel, at the height of the aerial bombardment of Iraq, spoke of a "quiet day in the Middle East," he did not mean that large masses of Iraqi conscripts were not being killed, only that no "important" people were getting hurt. And while the Gulf War was not a direct colonial war, the pornographic euphoria over "victory" was very much premised on a colonialist devalorization of non-western life.

Racism has, finally, its double binds and catch 22's: if you are too unlike us, you are inferior, and if you are too like us, you are a ridiculous mimic, no longer a "real" Black/Indian/Asian. Racism thus juggles two complementary procedures: the denial of difference and the denial of sameness. While obfuscating differences in historical experience, it denies a sameness in humanity and aspiration. Confronted with demands for the "affirmative" correction of historical injustices, the dominant group becomes the partisan of equality (let everyone be treated just the same), forgetting its own inherited advantages, thus denying the difference in location and experience. When the liberal, white South African lawyer in *A Dry White Season* stresses the commonalities between his experience and that of his black friend - "I grew up just like you, in the bush" - the friend corrects him: "So you too knew passbooks, imprisonment, humiliation?" The liberal ideal of "colour-blindness," which sees progress as a matter of "transcending" race, equates white racism with black cultural nationalism, as equally "race conscious." But black nationalism, as Gary Peller points out, sees integrationist rationality simply as a "particular discourse of power" used by white Europeans employed to justify their own privileged status.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many social theorists argue that liberalism is constitutively hierarchical and exclusionary, in that liberal claims about equality and rights actually hide another unacknowledged set of social credentials (whiteness, maleness, propriety, Americanness) which constitute the real bases of inclusion. It is the failure to acknowledge this "law off the books" that authorizes a racist discourse of reverse discrimination, a discourse which goes at least as far back as the days of slavery, when a French anti-abolitionist warned that abolition "would ruin France, and by seeking to liberate 500,000 blacks ... will have enslaved 25 million whites."<sup>14</sup>

Much of the work on ethnic/racial and colonial imagery in the media has been "corrective," devoted to demonstrating that certain films, in some respect or other, "got something wrong," whether on narrowly historical or biographical grounds or on grounds of verisimilitude. While posing legitimate questions about social plausibility and mimetic accuracy, "stereotypes and distortions" analyses have often been premised on an exclusive allegiance to a verisimilar aesthetic, when in fact representations can be convincingly verisimilar, yet racist, or conversely, fantastically "inaccurate," yet anti-racist. The obsession with "realism" has cast the question as simply one of pointing



to "errors" and "distortions," as if the "truth" of a community were unproblematic, transparent, and easily accessible, and "lies" about that community easily unmasked.

These debates about realism and accuracy are not trivial, a symptom of the "veristic idiocy," as a certain post-structuralism would have it, but rather significant and consequential. Spectators (and critics) are invested in realism because they are invested in the idea of truth, and reserve the right to confront a film with their personal and cultural knowledge. No deconstructionist fervor should induce us to surrender the right to find certain films sociologically false or ideologically pernicious, to see *Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, as an "objectively" racist film. That films are representations does not prevent them from having real effectivity in the world; racist films can mobilize for the Ku Klux Klan, or at the least prepare the ground for retrograde social policy. Recognizing the inevitability and the inescapability of representation does not mean, as Stuart Hall has put it, that "nothing is at stake."

The desire to reserve a right to judgement on questions of realism especially comes into play in cases where there are historical antecedents or real-life prototypes for characters and situations, and where the film, whatever its conventional disclaimers, implicitly makes, and is received as making, historical-realist claims. The veterans of the civil rights struggle have every right to critique *Mississippi Burning* (1988) on the grounds that it turns the historical enemy in the sixties — the FBI, which devoted most of its energies to harassing and sabotaging the civil rights movement — into the heroes, while turning the historical heroes — the thousands of African-Americans who marched and braved beatings and imprisonment and sometimes death — into passive victim-observers waiting for official white "rescue."<sup>15</sup> This struggle over meaning matters because *Mississippi Burning* might induce audiences to fundamentally misread American history, to idealize the FBI and regard African-Americans as mute witnesses rather than the makers of history.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although there is no absolute truth, no truth separate from representation and dissemination, there are still contingent, qualified, perspectival truths in which communities are invested.

Post-structuralist theory, meanwhile, reminds us that we live and dwell within language and representation, without direct access to the "real." But the constructed, coded nature of artistic discourse hardly precludes all reference to a common social life. Filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships. In his work, Bakhtin reformulates the notion of artistic representation in such a way as to avoid both a naive faith in "truth" and "reality" and the equally naive notion that the ubiquity of language and representation signifies the end of struggle and the "end of history." Human consciousness and artistic practice, Bakhtin argues, do not come into contact with the "real" directly but rather through the medium of the surrounding ideological world. Literature, and by extension cinema, does not so

much refer to or call up the world as represent its languages and discourses. Rather than the direct reflection of the real, or even a refraction of the real, artistic discourse constitutes a refraction of a refraction, i.e., a mediated version of an already textualized and discursivized socio-ideological world. This formulation transcends a naive referential verism without ever falling into a "hermeneutic nihilism" whereby all texts become nothing more than a meaningless play of signification.<sup>17</sup>

The issue is less one of fidelity to a pre-existing truth or reality, then, than one of a specific orchestration of ideological discourses and communitarian perspectives. While on one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers. In this sense, it is a representation not so much in a mimetic as a political sense, as a delegation of voice.<sup>18</sup> It makes more sense, within this perspective, to say of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1984) not that it is untrue to "reality," but rather that it relays the colonialist discourse of official white South Africa. The racism of this discourse, which posits a Manichean binarism contrasting noble but impotent Bantustan savages with dangerous but incompetent mulatto-led revolutionaries, is camouflaged by a superficial critique of white technological civilization. A discursive approach to *First Blood (Rambo)* (1983), similarly, would not argue that it "distorts" reality, but rather that it

<sup>9</sup>Originally in *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* (Dec. 20, 1891) but quoted in David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford, 1992), p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> General Schwarzkopf during the Gulf War, similarly, expressed concern over every one of "our boys," while portraying the Iraqis, the very people who were dying en masse, as people "who do not value life the way we do."

<sup>11</sup> See U.S. Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," *Politics and Society* 18, 4 (1990), pp. 429-430.

<sup>12</sup> Broadcast on PBS, channel 13, on December 10, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Peller, "Race Against Integration," *Tikkun*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (Jan/Feb, 1991), pp. 54-66.

<sup>14</sup> Todorov, p. 259.

<sup>15</sup> For more on FBI harassment of civil rights activists, see Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972"* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. 15. For more on FBI harassment of civil rights activists, see Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972"* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Pam Sporn, a New York City educator, had her high school students go to the South and video-interview Civil Rights veterans about their memories of the Civil Rights struggle and their reactions to *Mississippi Burning*.

<sup>17</sup> I work these arguments out in detail in my *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, in a similar spirit, distinguish between "representation as a practice of depicting" and "representation as a practice of delegation." See Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Introduction: De Margin and De Centre," *Screen* Vol. 29, No. 4 (1988), pp. 2-10.



"really" represents a rightist and racist discourse designed to flatter and nourish the masculinist fantasies of omnipotence characteristic of an empire in crisis. By the same token, a postmodern film, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), that seems sociologically flawed from a mimetic perspective — given its foregrounding of wealthy rather than more typically working class Asians — looks considerably better when regarded as a constellation of discursive strategies, as a provocative symbolic inversion of conventional expectations of a 'miserabilist' account of Asian victimization.

That something is vitally at stake in these debates becomes obvious in those instances where entire communities passionately protest the representations that are made of them in the name of their experiential sense of truth. Hollywood stereotypes, for example, have not gone unremarked by the victimized communities. Native Americans, very early on, vocally protested misrepresentations of their culture and history.<sup>19</sup> A 1911 *Moving Picture World* reports the sending of a Native American delegation to President Taft to protest erroneous representations and even ask for a Congressional investigation.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, the NAACP protested *Birth of a Nation*. Chicanos protested the "bandido" films, Mexico protested *Viva Villa!* (1934), and Latin Americans generally protested the caricaturing of their cultures. (The Mexican government threatened to block the distribution of Hollywood films if the industry did not cease to export films caricaturing Mexico, Mexican Americans and the Mexican revolution.) In a later period, the Turks protested *Midnight Express* (1978), Puerto Ricans protested *Fort Apache the Bronx* (1981), Africans protested *Out of Africa* (1985) and Asian-Americans protested *The Year of the Dragon* (1985). Critical spectators can thus exert pressure on distribution,

on exhibition, and even affect subsequent productions. While such public-sphere pressure does not guarantee sympathetic representations, it does at least mean that aggressively hurtful portrayals will not go unchallenged.

Although total realism is a theoretical impossibility, then, spectators themselves come equipped with a "sense of the real" rooted in their experience, on the basis of which they can accept, question, or even subvert a film's representations. The hair-trigger sensitivity about racial stereotypes derives partially from what has been labelled the "burden of representation." On the symbolic battlegrounds of the mass media, the struggle over representation in the simulacral realm homologizes that of the political sphere, where the question of imitation and representation easily slides into issues of delegation and voice. (The heated debate around which celebrity photographs, whether of Italian-Americans or of African-Americans, will adorn the wall of Sal's Pizzeria in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, vividly exemplifies this kind of struggle within representation). Since what Memmi calls the "mark of the plural" projects colonized people as "all the same," any negative behaviour by any member of the oppressed community is instantly generalized as typical. Representations thus become allegorical, i.e., every subaltern performer/role within hegemonic discourse is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast and impossibly heterogeneous community. What is problematic is the lack of reciprocity within this allegorical process; representations of dominant groups are not seen as allegorical but as "naturally" diverse, examples of the normal and ungeneralizable variety of life itself.<sup>21</sup> Socially empowered groups need not be unduly concerned with "distortions and stereotypes," since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representations. Each negative image of an under-represented



*My Beautiful Laundrette*



group becomes, within the hermeneutics of domination, sorely overcharged with allegorical meaning.

This sensitivity also operates on a continuum with other representations and with everyday life, where the "burden" can indeed become almost unbearable. It is this continuum that is ignored when analysts place the stereotypes of so-called "ethnic Americans," for example, on the same level as those of native-Americans or African-Americans. While all negative stereotypes are hurtful, they do not all exercise an equivalent degree of social power in the world. The facile invocation of "stereotypes" elides a crucial distinction. Some stereotypes merely make the target group mildly uncomfortable, but the group has the social power to combat and resist them; other stereotypes enter into a continuum of prejudicial social policy and actual violence against a disempowered group, placing the very body of the accused in jeopardy. Stereotypes of Polish-Americans and Italian-Americans, however regrettable, are not used to justify daily violence or structural oppression against these groups. The tendency on the part of the media to present all black males as delinquents in potentia, in contrast, has searing impact on the actual lives of black people. The Bush campaign's "allegorical" deployment of the "black buck" figure of Willie Horton in order to trigger the sexual/racial phobias of white voters, for example, dramatically sharpened the burden of representation carried by millions of black men, and indirectly by black women.

The sensitivity around "stereotypes and distortions" largely arises, then, from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation. A full understanding of filmic representation therefore requires a comprehensive analysis of the institutions that generate and distribute mass mediated texts as well as the audience which receives them. What are the structural

mechanisms of the film and media industry itself? Who controls production, distribution, exhibition? The most recent report on Hollywood employment practices released by the NAACP reveals that blacks are under-represented in "each and every aspect" of the entertainment industry. The 1991 study, entitled "Out of Focus — Out of Sync" claims that blacks are unable to make final decisions in the motion picture process and that only a handful of blacks hold executive positions with film studios and television networks. Although blacks purchase a disproportionate share of domestic movie tickets, nepotism, cronyism and racial discrimination combine to bar blacks and black-owned businesses from the industry.<sup>22</sup> And blacks are not the only disadvantaged group in this respect. While producers assume that Italian-American directors should direct films about Italian Americans, Camilo Vila complains, they choose Anglos to direct films about Latinos.<sup>23</sup>

A system that favours big-budget blockbusters, similarly, is not only classist but also Eurocentric and racist in effect, if not in explicit intention, in that it favours groups with economic power and discriminates against those

<sup>19</sup> An article in *Moving Picture World* (7/10/1911), entitled "Indians Grieve over Picture Shows," reports on protests by Native Americans from Southern California concerning Hollywood's portrayal of them as warriors when in fact they were peaceful farmers.

<sup>20</sup> *Moving Picture World* report 8/3/1911.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Williamson makes this point in her essay in *Screen* Vol. 29, No. 4 (1988), pp. 2-10.

<sup>22</sup> See *New York Times* (Sept. 24, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> See Gary M. Stern, "Why the Dearth of Latino Directors?" *Cineaste* XIX, Nos. 2-3 (1992).



*A World Apart*

without it. Third World filmmakers are asked, in effect, to worship an impossible standard of cinematic "civility." Many Third World countries reinforce hegemony, furthermore, by discriminating against their own native cultural productions (Brazilian TV systematically favours American films). The situation in film exists on a continuum with other fields such as information, where first world institutions (CNN, AP) provide the filter for the world's news. Distribution advantages too tend to lie with the first world countries. Hollywood films often arrive in the Third World "pre-advertised" in that much of the media hype revolving around prestigious big-budget productions reaches the Third World through journalistic articles and television reports prior even to the local release of the film. The dissemination of American popular music also buttresses the dissemination of Hollywood films. Films such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Purple Rain* (1984), *Truth or Dare* (1991) and *The Bodyguard* (1992) all arrive pre-advertised because multinational-dominated media have already given over considerable air time to the music featured in the films. Even the Oscar ceremonies constitute a powerful form of advertising; the audience is global, yet the product promoted is almost always American, what is patronizingly called the "rest of the world" usually being corralled into the restricted category of "foreign" film.

The Eurocentrism of audiences, especially of American audiences, can also infect cinematic production. Here the dominant audience/market whose ideological assumptions must be respected if a film is to be successful, or even be made at all, exerts a kind of indirect hegemony. A whole series of big-budget anti-apartheid films — *Cry Freedom*

(1987), *A World Apart* (1988) and *A Dry White Season* (1989) — betray traces of "representational adjustments" because the values of a radical liberation struggle are being watered down for a predominantly liberal American audience. In these films, the challenge of bridging cultural difference, according to Rob Nixon, becomes "overlaid with problems of profound ideological incompatibility." As a result, the story of Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* gives way to a story of the "friendship that rocked the world." The radical discourse of the Black Consciousness movement is replaced with a "palatable liberal discourse of moral decen-

cy and human rights." Nixon contrasts the experience of *Cry Freedom* with the more radical *Mapantsula*, a film where moralistic concerns do not shoulder out strategic institutional questions. The film's refusal to observe the "mass market conventions of translating a radical South African narrative into a white-mediated, liberal idiom" resulted in the film's failure to draw a major distributor.<sup>24</sup>

The politics of racial representation were not "unconscious," they were the object of explicit debate and negotiation within the Hollywood production system, a question of the competing influences of Southern (and Northern) racists, liberals, black public advocacy groups, censors, cautious producers and so forth. Thomas Cripps describes the processes by which potential blackness in films was edited out; the way that an all-black family became white during the scripting process of *Till the End of Time* (1946); or the way that the African-American music that inspired much of George Gershwin's work was gradually elided from the biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), leaving Paul Whiteman to "make a lady out of jazz;" or the way that Frank Yerby's critique of plantation mythology became a formula romance in *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947); or the way that *Lydia Bailey* (1952) turned from a story about Toussaint l'Ouverture and the Haitian revolution into a white-focalized romance.<sup>25</sup> The production processes of individual films bring up questions concerning the film-making apparatus and the participation of "minorities" within that apparatus. It seems noteworthy, for example, that in multi-ethnic but white-dominated societies such as South Africa, Brazil and the U. S., blacks have tended to participate in the filmmaking process mainly as performers rather than as producers, directors and



script-writers. In South Africa, whites finance, script, direct and produce films with all-black casts. In the U.S. in the 1920's, all-white film making crews shot all-black musicals like *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929). Blacks then, like women, appeared as images in spectacles whose social thrust was primarily shaped by others: black souls as white man's artifact. Even today, despite the success of people like Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby and Arsenio Hall, there are no major black executives in Hollywood studios. And since commercial films are designed to make profits, we must also ask to whom these profits go. The thousands of black Brazilians who played at an out-of-season carnival, with virtually no pay, for the benefit of Marcel Camus' French cameras, never saw the millions of dollars that *Black Orpheus* made around the world. More recently, the Brazilian performers from "Olodum," who participated in Paul Simon's "Spirit of the Saints" album/video, received no royalties for a performance that provided much of the energy of the music.<sup>26</sup>

A film inevitably mirrors, to a certain extent, its own processes of production as well as larger social processes. At times harassment of minoritarian communities takes place during the production of films about the harassment of minoritarian communities. In the case of Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976), a film partially about police repression in African-American inner city, the filmmakers were harassed by the police during the making of the film. Black men with cameras, like black men with guns, the police assumed, could be up to no good.<sup>27</sup> In other cases, we find a contradiction between the politics of the film and the politics of production. The presumably anti-colonial film *Gandhi* (1982), dedicated to the patron saint of non-violent struggle, for example, deployed a differential pay scale that favoured European technicians and performers. In *Hearts of Darkness*, the documentary about the production of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola speaks of the low cost of Filipino labour. The filmmaker, in this sense, inherits first-world privileges, not unlike the corporate manager who relocates to the Third World to take advantage of local cheap labour.

Film and theatre casting, as an immediate form of representation, constitutes a kind of delegation of voice with political overtones. Here too Europeans and Euro-Americans have played the preponderant role, relegating



non-Europeans to supporting roles and the status of extras. Within Hollywood cinema, Euro-Americans have historically enjoyed the unilateral prerogative of acting in "blackface," "redface," "brownface" and "yellowface," while the reverse has rarely been the case. The tradition of blackface recital, from the 19th century vaudeville stage through such figures as Al Jolson in *Hi Lo Broadway* (1933), Fred Astaire in *Swing Time* (1936), Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in *Babes in Arms* (1939) and Bing Crosby in *Dixie* (1943) furnished one of the most popular of American pop-cultural forms, to the point that even black minstrels like Bert Williams, as the film *Ethnic Notions* points out, were obliged to conform to the stereotype; burnt cork literalized, as it were, the trope of blackness. Even in the sound period, a long series of white actresses were called on to play the "tragic mulatas" of such films as *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959),

<sup>23</sup> See Gary M. Stern, "Why the Dearth of Latino Directors?" *Cineaste* XIX, Nov. 2-3 (1992).

<sup>24</sup> See Rob Nixon, "Cry White Season: Apartheid, Liberalism, and the American Screen," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, No. 90, Vol. 3 (Summer 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Minoritarian filmmakers such as Spike Lee consciously channel profits back to the community, choosing to stay in Brooklyn rather than move to Bel Air.

<sup>27</sup> See Clyde Taylor, "Decolonizing the Image," in Peter Steven, ed. *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1985), p. 168.

while real-life "mulatas" were cast for black female roles—for example, Lena Horn in *Cabin in the Sky*—although they could have easily "passed" for white roles. In other words, it is not the literal colour of the actor that mattered in casting. Given the "blood" definition of "black" versus "white" in Euro-American racist discourse, one drop of black blood was sufficient to disqualify an actress like Lena Horn from representing white women.

African-Americans were not the only "people of colour" to be played by Euro-Americans; the same law of unilateral privilege has functioned in relation to other groups. Rock Hudson, Joey Bishop, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Boris Karloff, Tom Mix, Elvis Presley, Anne Bancroft, Cyd Charisse, Loretta Young, Mary Pickford, and Dame Judith Anderson are among the Euro-American actors that have represented Native American roles, while Paul Muni, Charleton Heston, Marlon Brando and Natalie Wood are among those who have played Hispanic characters. As late as *Windwalker* (1973), the most important Indian roles were not played by Native Americans. Dominant cinema is fond of turning "dark" or Third World peoples into substitutable others, interchangeable units who can "stand in" for one another. Thus the Mexican Dolores del Rio was recruited to play a South Seas Samoan in *The Bird of Paradise*, while the Indian Sabu was called on to play a wide range of Arab-Oriental roles. Lupe Velez, actually Mexican, was asked to portray Chinese, Inuit, Japanese, Malaysians, and Indian squaws, and Omar Sharif, an Egyptian, plays Che Guevara.<sup>28</sup> It is precisely this asymmetry in representational power that has generated intense resentment among minoritarian communities. The casting of a non-member of the group in question can thus be seen as a triple insult, implying a) you are unworthy of self-representation; b) no one from your group is capable of representing you, and c) we, the producers of the film, care little about your offended sensibilities, for we have the power and there is nothing you can do about it.

In recent years Hollywood has made gestures toward "correct" casting: African-American, Native American, Latino/a performers do "represent" their communities. But this "realistic" casting is hardly sufficient if narrative structure and cinematic strategies remain Eurocentric. An epidermically correct face hardly guarantees community self-representation, just as in the political sphere Clarence Thomas's black skin did not mean that he necessarily represented African-American interests. Delegating a representative according to chromatic characteristics is on the whole meaningless unless the person is also the vehicle of critical discourses linked to the history of that biological presence in the world and to the community in which that presence has been lived.

A number of film and theatre directors have sought alternative approaches to literally self-representative casting. Orson Welles was fond of staging all-black versions of Shakespeare plays, most notably in his "Voodoo Macbeth" in Harlem in 1936. Peter Brooks cast African performers, similarly, in his filmic adaptation of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. Such anti-literal strategies provoke an irrev-

erent question: what is wrong with this non-originary casting? Doesn't acting always involve a ludic play with identity? Should we applaud blacks playing Hamlet but not Lawrence Olivier playing Othello? And don't Euro-American and European actors and actresses substitute for one another (e.g., Greta Garbo and Cyd Charisse as Russians in *Nimotchka* (1939) and *Silk Stockings* (1957)). Casting has to be seen in contingent terms, in relation to the role, to the political and aesthetic intention, and to the historical moment. We cannot equate a gigantic charade whereby a whole foreign country is represented by actors/actresses not from that country, and imagined as speaking a language not its own—a frequent Hollywood practice—and cases where non-literal casting is part of an alternative aesthetic. The casting of blacks to play Hamlet, for example, militates against a traditional discrimination that denied blacks any role, literally and metaphorically, in both the performing arts and in politics, while the casting of Lawrence Olivier as Othello prolongs a venerable history of deliberately bypassing black talent. We see the possibilities of epidermically incorrect casting in *Seeing Double*, a San Francisco Mime Troupe play about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where an ethnically diverse cast takes on shifting roles in such a way as to posit analogical links between communities. An African-American actor plays both a Palestinian-American and a Jewish-American, for example, thus hinting at a common history of exclusion binding Blacks, Jews, and Arabs.

## WRITING HOLLYWOOD AND RACE

Following up on this theoretical/institutional preamble, I would like to point to some of the important work already done on ethnic/racial representation, especially in Hollywood cinema, emphasizing particularly the representation of oppressed groups within the U.S. Beginning with the Native American, we may note that Vine Deloria, Ralph and Natasha Friar, Ward Churchill and many others have exposed the binaristic splitting which turned Native Americans into bloodthirsty beasts/noble savages. Native American critics have denounced the "redface" convention, i.e., the practice of having non-Native Americans—white (Rock Hunter), latino (Ricardo Montalban) or Japanese (Sessue Hayakawa)—play Native American roles. The critics draw attention to the complacent ignorance of Hollywood portrayals, the cultural flattening that erases the geographical and cultural differences between Great Plains tribes and those from other regions, which have Indians of the Northeast wearing Plains Indians clothing and living in Hopi dwellings, all collapsed into a single stereotypical figure, the "instant Indian" with "wig, war bonnet, breechclout, moccasins, phony beadwork."<sup>29</sup> More important, these analysts critique the refusal to even imagine an indigenous perspective. Even "sympathetic" films like *A Man Called Horse* (1970), hailed as an authentic portrayal, Ward Churchill points out, depicts a people "whose language is Lakota, whose hairstyles range from Assiniboi through Nez Perce



to Comache, whose tipi design is Crow, and whose Sun Dance ceremony ... [is] typically Mandan."<sup>30</sup> The film has the Anglo captive teach the Indians the finer points of the bow, a weapon that had been in use by Native Americans for countless generations, thus demonstrating "the presumed inherent superiority of Eurocentric minds."<sup>31</sup>

A popular film like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) demonstrates the need for a nuanced multi-valent analysis. While on one level a breakthrough by casting Native Americans to play themselves, the film was less progressive in placing its story in a distant past cordoned off from contemporary struggles. Rather than focalize the actual struggles of living native people, the film offers the romanticized adventures of a sensitive white man. But a thoroughgoing analysis must see the film as contradictory, affirming at the same time that the film 1) constitutes a relatively progressive step in its adoption of a pro-indigenous perspective, and 2) in respecting the linguistic integrity of the Native Americans; yet that 3) this progressive step is partially undermined by the traditional split portrayal of "bad" Pawnees/ good Sioux, that 4) it is further compromised by its elegiac emphasis on the remote past and 5) by the foregrounding of a Euro-American protagonist; 6) yet that this Euro-American focalization, given the mass-audience's identificatory propensities, also guaranteed the film's wide impact; and 7) that this impact indirectly helped open doors for Native American filmmakers, without 8) dramatically improving the situation of most Native Americans, but also 9) altering the ways in which such films are likely to be made in the future.<sup>32</sup> A textually subtle and contextualized analysis, then, must be able to assert that all these apparently contradictory points are true at the same time, without lapsing into a Manichean good film/bad film binaristic schema, the "progressive" equivalent of "bad object" criticism.<sup>33</sup>

A number of scholars, notably Donald Bogle, Daniel Leab, James Snead, Jim Pines, Eric Perkins, Jacquie Jones, Pearl Bowser, Clyde Taylor, and Thomas Cripps, have explored the ways that pre-existing stereotypes — for example the jiving sharpster and shuffling stage sambo — were transferred from antecedent media to film. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, Donald Bogle surveys representations of blacks in Hollywood cinema, especially foregrounding the unequal struggle between black performers and the stereotypical roles offered them by Hollywood. Bogle's title already announces the five major stereotypes: 1) the servile "Tom" (going back to Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); 2) the "Coon" — Step'n Fetchit is the archetypal example — a type itself subdivided into a) the "pickaninny" (harmless eye-popping clown figure) and b) the Uncle Remus (naive, congenial folk philosopher); 3) the "Tragic Mulatto," usually a woman, victim of a dual racial inheritance, who tries to "pass for white" in such films as *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1934/1959), or, in a not so tragic form, the demonized mulatto man, devious and ambitious, for example Silas

Lynch in *Birth of a Nation*; 4) the "Mammy," the fat, cantankerous but ultimately sympathetic female servant (the Aunt Jemima "handkerchief head" being a variant) — for example, Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* — who often provides the human glue that keeps a number of households together; and 5) the "Buck," the brutal, hypersexualized black man, a figure of menace inherited from the stage, whose most famous filmic incarnation is perhaps Gus in *Birth of a Nation*, and which George Bush resuscitated for electoral purposes in the figure of Willie Horton.

Bogle's book goes beyond the issue of stereotypes to focus on the ways that African-American performers have "signified" and subverted the roles forced on them. The history of black performance, for Bogle, is one of battling against confining types and categories, a battle homologous to the quotidian struggle of three-dimensional blacks against the imprisoning conventions of an apartheid-style system. Thus black performance encodes in often sanitized, ambiguous ways the "hidden transcripts" of a subordinated group. If we see performance, as James C. Scott points out in a completely different context, as determined from above, we "miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends." A kind of "euphemization" occurs when hidden transcripts are expressed within power-laden situations by actors who

<sup>28</sup> Clear social hierarchies also inform the practice of substitutional casting. The evolution of casting in Israeli cinema, for example, reflects changing strategies of representation. The heroic-nationalist films of the 50s and 60s, which focussed on the Israeli-Arab conflict, typically featured heroic Euro-Israeli Sabras, played by European Jews (Ashkenazis), fighting villainous Arabs, while Sephardi Arab-Jewish actors and characters had virtually no place at all except in the "degraded" roles of Muslim Arabs. In virtually all the recent political films, in contrast, Israeli-Palestinian actors and non-professionals play the Palestinian roles. Such casting, at times for major roles, allows for a modicum of "self-representation" in the form of actors "representing" their national identity. And at times the Palestinian actors have actually forced radicalization of certain scenes. In some films Palestinian actors have even been cast as Israeli military officers, the case of Makram Hourri in *The Smile of the Lamb* and in Palestinian-Belgium film *Wedding in Galilee*. For more on casting in Israeli Cinema, see Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> See Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet, "Entertaining Anachronism: Indians in American Film," in Randall M. Miller, ed. *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups* (Englewood, N.J.: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980).

<sup>30</sup> See Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians* (Montreal, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992), p. 237.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>32</sup> For a thorough discussion of *Dances With Wolves* from a Native American point of view, see Edward Castillo's essay in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer 1991).

<sup>33</sup> See Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

prefer to avoid the sanctions that a direct statement might bring.<sup>34</sup> At their best, black performances undercut stereotypes by individualizing the type or slyly standing above it. Hattie McDaniel's "flamboyant bossiness," her way of looking Scarlett right in the eye, within this project, translated aggressive hostility toward a racist system. Throughout, Bogle emphasizes the resilient imagination of black performers obliged to play against script and studio intentions, their capacity to turn demeaning roles into resistant performance and thus reveal the "hidden transcripts" of black life.<sup>35</sup> Thus "each major black actor of the day managed to reveal some unique quality of voice or personality that audiences immediately responded to. Who could forget Bojangle's urbanity? Or Rochester's cement-mixer voice? Or Louise Beavers' jollity? Or Hattie McDaniel's haughtiness?"<sup>36</sup>

Historically, Hollywood has tried to "teach" black performers how to conform to its own stereotypes. Louise Beavers, whose voice had no trace of dialect or southern patois, had to school herself in the southern drawl considered compulsory for every black subaltern. Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) satirizes these racial conventions by having white directors oblige black actors to conform to white stereotypes about blackness. In the film, the white directors give lessons in street jive, gestures and mannerisms, all of which the Shakespeare-oriented black actor-protagonist finds supremely distasteful. The protagonist's own dream, presented in a fantasy sequence, is to play prestigious hero roles such as Superman and "Rambo" or tragic roles like King Lear. The desire for dignified dramatic and socially prestigious roles reflects a desire to be taken seriously, to not always be the butt of the joke, to win access to the generic prestige historically associated with tragedy and epic, even if this desire is relayed, paradoxically, in parodic form.

A number of didactic documentaries address precisely these issues. *The Media Show: North American Indians* (1991) critically dissects the portrayal of "Indians" in Hollywood films (including *Dances with Wolves*). Phil Lucas and Robert Hagopian's five-part *Images of Indians* (1979) examines Hollywood films as purveyor of Native American stereotypes, as does the British *Savagery and the American Indian*. *Black History: Lost, Stolen, and Strayed*, narrated by Bill Cosby, criticizes the historical misrepresentations and stereotypical portrayals of blacks. Marlon Rigg's *Ethnic Notions* stresses the pain caused by stereotypes incarnated in racist cartoons, toys, and films, in a film which alternates citations of racist materials with interviews with African-American performers and scholars. Gloria Ribe's *From Here, From This Side* (1988) deploys Hollywood films and archival material to communicate a vision of cultural domination from the Mexican side. *Who Killed Vincent Chin*, a film about the murder by white auto workers of a Chinese-American whom they took to be Japanese, uses media materials in its portrayal of anti-Asian discrimination. Valerie Soe's *All Orientals Look the Same* undercuts the orientaling "mark of the plural" by having very diverse Asian-American faces dis-

solve into one another. Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Yellow Tale Blues* juxtaposes media imagery with the actual situations of Asian-Americans. Deborah Gee's *Slaying the Dragon*, finally, uses film clips (e.g., *The World of Suzie Wong*) and interviews to show the ways in which Asian women have been stereotyped as docile and exotic.

Marlon Rigg's *Color Adjustment* (1992) chronicles the history of black representations on television, from the caricatural days of *Amos and Andy* through black sitcoms like *Good Times* through *Roots*, which made way for the ultimate black American family: the Huxtables of the *Cosby Show*. Throughout, *Color Adjustment* speaks less about "authentic" representation than about the fundamental paradigm lurking behind most of the shows — the idealized suburban nuclear family. In one of the quoted programs, Edith Bunker praises black progress: "They used to all be servants, and maids, and waiters, and now they're lawyers and doctors. They've come a long way on television!" But this simulacral meliorism, *Color Adjustment* suggests, is deeply inadequate. Even if television offered nothing but endless *Cosby Shows*, nothing but the most positive of images, the concrete situation of African-Americans would not necessarily be substantially improved. *Color Adjustment* underlines this contrast between media image and social reality by suggestively juxtaposing sitcom episodes with documentary street footage, sometimes by way of contrast (*The Brady Bunch* versus police repression of civil rights marches) and sometimes by way of comparison (anti-bussing demonstrators hurling racial epithets juxtaposed with Archie Bunker's racial inanities). *Fade to Black* (1989), finally, aggressively orchestrates very diverse materials: a capsule history of blacks in films, Althusser-influenced theoretical interventions, clips from feature films (*Vertigo*, *Taxi Driver*), rap music and a hard-hitting voice-over commentary about one man's experience of racism. The voice-over focuses on "proxemic" forms of racism: the white motorist who instinctively clicks the car door lock upon seeing a black, the white matron who clutches her purse.

#### THE LIMITS OF THE STEREOTYPE

I do not propose to summarize the work on stereotypes here; rather, I would like both to argue for the importance of such work and raise some methodological questions about its underlying premises. (I am not implying that the work of the writers mentioned earlier is in any way reducible to "stereotype analysis.") To begin, stereotype analysis has made an indispensable contribution by 1) revealing oppressive patterns of prejudice in what might at first glance have seemed random and inchoate phenomena; 2) highlighting the psychic devastation caused by systematically negative portrayals, especially to those groups aggressed and imprisoned by them, whether through internalization of the stereotypes themselves, or through the negative effects of their dissemination; 3) signalling the social functionality of stereotypes, demonstrating that stereotypes were not an error of perception but rather a



## The Defiant Ones



form of social control, intended as what staff member Alice, of the Alternative Museum, calls "prisons of image."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the "negative stereotype/positive images" approach is questionable from a theoretical - methodological standpoint, entailing a number of pitfalls. First, the exclusive preoccupation with images, whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of essentialism, as the critic reduces a complex diversity of portrayals to a limited set of reified stereotypes. Such criticism is procrustean; the critic forces extremely diverse fictive characters into pre-established categories. Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racism they were initially designed to combat.

This essentialism generates in its wake a certain ahistoricism; the analysis tends to be static, not allowing for mutations, metamorphoses, changes of valence, altered function, it ignores the historical instability of the stereotype. Some of the five basic stereotypes invoked by Donald Bogle, for example, were not originally anti-black. Prior to 1848, the word "coon" referred to rural whites, becoming a racial slur only around 1848. The term "buck," at the

time of the American revolution, meant a "dashing, virile young man," and became associated with blacks only after 1835.<sup>38</sup> Stereotype analysis also fails to register the ways that imagery might be shaped, for example, by structural changes in the economy. How does one reconcile the "lazy Mexican" from the "greaser films" with the media's "illegal alien" overly eager to work long hours at half pay? On the other hand, images may change, while the function remains the same, or vice versa. Marlon Rigg's documen-

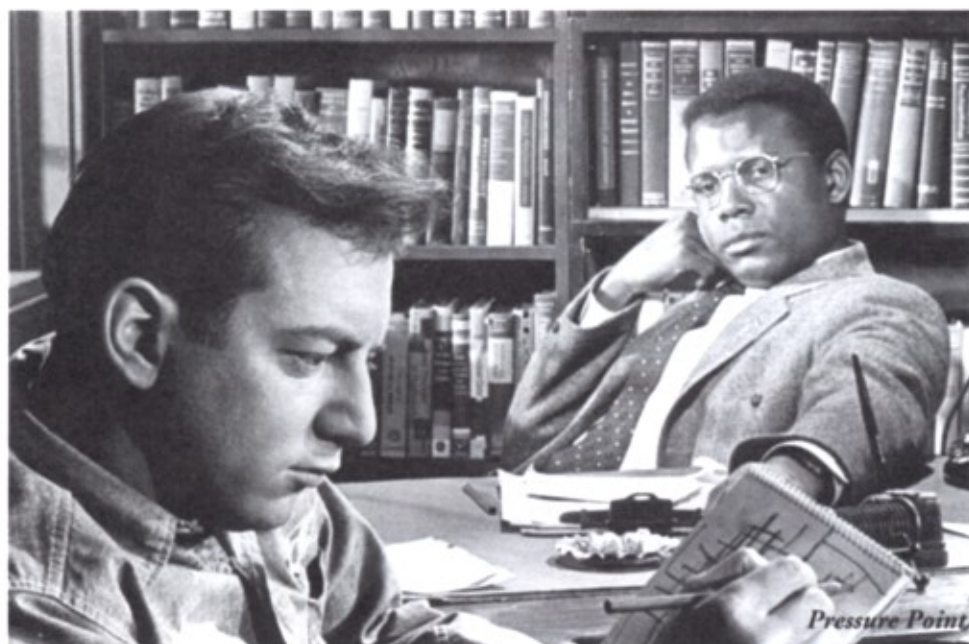
<sup>34</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale, 1990), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase "hidden transcripts" is from James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, Publication of the Alternative Museum, New York City (1989).

<sup>38</sup> See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 88-89.



geo-political events become morality plays in which virtuous American heroes do battle against demonized Third World villains. The intertext of these demonizations is partially derived from colonialist discourse. Thus Bush/Reagan portrayals of its enemies drew on the "Manichean allegories" (Jan Mohamed) of colonialism; thus the Sandinistas were portrayed as latter-day bandits, the mestizo Noriega was made to incarnate anglo phobias about Latino men (violent, drug-dealing, voodoo-practising), and Saddam Hussein was used to trigger the intertextual memory of Moslem fanatics and assassins.

Stereotypic analysis is also covertly premised on individ-

uary *Ethnic Notions*, especially eloquent on this point, explains that the role of the Uncle Tom was not to represent blacks but rather to reassure whites with a comforting image of black docility, just as the role of the black buck, ever since Reconstruction, has been to frighten whites in order to subordinate them to elite manipulation, a device invented by Southern Dixiecrats but subsequently adopted by the Republican Party. The positive images of black-cast television comedies like *Different Strokes* and *The Jeffersons*, Herman Gray argues, idealize "racial harmony, affluence, and individual mobility" and thus "deflect attention from the persistence of racism, inequality, and differential power."<sup>39</sup> Stereotypes, moreover, are inseparable from the long history of colonialist discourse. The "sambo" type is on one level merely a circumscribed characterological instantiation of the infantilizing trope. The "tragic mulatto" figure, in the same vein, is a cautionary figure premised on the trope of purity, the loathing of mixing, characteristic of a certain racist discourse. Many of the scandalously racist statements discussed in the media, similarly, are less eccentric views than throwbacks to colonialist discourses. TV commentator Andy Rooney's widely censured remark that blacks had "watered down their genes," seen in historical perspective, is not a maverick "opinion" but rather a return to the nostrums of "racial degeneracy" theories.

The focus on "good" and "bad" characters easily slides into moralism, and thus into fruitless debates about the relative virtues of fictive characters (seen not as constructs but as if they were real flesh-and-blood people) and the correctness of their fictional actions. This kind of anthropocentric moralism, deeply rooted in Manichean notions of good and evil, leads to political issues being treated as if they were matters of individual morality. Even complex

ualism, in that the individual character, rather than larger social categories (race, class, gender, nation, sexual orientation), remains the point of reference. Individual morality receives more attention than the larger configurations of power. (Thus pro-business "content analysts" can lament without irony the TV's "stereotyping" of American businessmen, forgetting that television as an institution, at least, is permeated by the corporate ethos, that its commercials and even its shows are commercials for business. The focus on individual character also misses the ways in which whole cultures, as opposed to individuals, can be caricatured, without a single character being stereotyped. The tendentially flawed mimesis of many films dealing with the Third World, with their innumerable ethnographic, linguistic and even topographical blunders, for example, has less to do with stereotypes per se than with the reductive topoi of colonialist discourse. The topographical essentialism that reduces Africa to jungle or Arabia to desert, similarly, bypasses the issue of stereotype. The social institutions and cultural practices of colonized people can be defamed, similarly, without the issue of individual stereotypes entering into the question. Countless films and TV programs reproduce the Eurocentric prejudices against African spirit religions, for example, by regarding them as superstitious cults rather than as legitimate belief-systems. Such representations encode a superimposed series of Western hierarchies working to the detriment of African religions: oral rather than written, they are seen as lacking the cultural imprimatur of the religions of the book (in fact the text simply takes distinct semiotic form, as in Yoruba praise songs), seen as polytheistic rather than monotheistic (actually a misrepresentation of many African religions), as superstitious rather than scientific (an inheritance from the positivist view of



religion as evolving from myth to theology to science), and as disturbingly corporeal and insufficiently sublimated (for example, involving actual animal sacrifice rather than symbolic or historically commemorative sacrifice). Diasporic syncretic religions of African origin are almost invariably caricatured in dominant media. Thus *The Believers* (1986) presents the Afro-Caribbean religion *santeria* as a cult dominated by ritual child-murderers. (The film's appurtenance to the horror genre betrays its viscerally phobic attitude to African religion.) The Michael Caine comedy *Blame It on Rio* (1984,) meanwhile, stages the Afro-Brazilian religion of *umbanda* as a frenetic orgy in which the priestess (*mac de santo*) doles out amorous advice in English to tourists. The electronic media also participate in these defamatory portrayals. Local "Eyewitness News" reporters, in New York at least, see *santeria* as a problem in law enforcement, or an issue of "cruelty to animals." Habitual chicken eaters become suddenly horrified at the ritual slaughter of chickens, while officials openly call for an "end to *santeria*," a call unthinkable in the case of "respectable" religions. In sum, a vast cultural complex can be defamed without recourse to a character stereotype.<sup>40</sup>

A moralistic/individualistic approach also ignores the contradictory nature of stereotypes. Black figures, in Toni Morrison's words, come to signify polar opposites: "On the one hand, they signify benevolence, harmless and servile guardianship and endless love. On the other hand, they have come to represent insanity, illicit sexuality, chaos."<sup>41</sup> A moralistic/individualistic approach also side-steps the issue of the profoundly relative nature of "morality," eliding the question of positive for whom? It ignores the fact that oppressed people might have not only a different vision of morality, but even an opposite vision, whence the African-American penchant for inverting the ethical valences of everyday language, using the word "bad" to mean "good" and "nasty" to mean "the best." Even the Decalogue loses its sacrosanctness in a situation of bitter social oppression. Within slavery, for example, it might be admirable and therefore "good" to lie to, manipulate, and even murder a slavedriver? The "positive image" approach thus assumes a bourgeois morality intimately linked to status quo politics. What is seen as "positive" by the dominant group, e.g., the acts of those "Indians" in westerns who spy for the whites, might be seen as treason by the dominated group. The taboo in Hollywood was not on "positive images" but rather on images of racial equality, images of anger and revolt.

The privileging of character over narrative and social structure places the burden on oppressed people to be "good" rather than on the privileged to remove the knife from the back. The oppressed, in order to be equal, are asked to be better, whence all the stoic "ebony saints" (Bogle) of Hollywood, from Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (1934), through Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1961) to Whoopi Goldberg in *Clara's Heart* (1988). The saintly black forms a Manichean pair with the demon black, furthermore, in a moralistic schema reminiscent of

that structuring *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Saints tend to be desexualized, deprived of normal human attributes, along the lines of the "black eunuch," cast in decorative or subservient poses.<sup>42</sup> The privileging of positive images also elides the patent differences, the social and moral heteroglossia, characteristic of any social group. A cinema of positive images, characterized by a bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude betrays a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection. A cinema in which all black characters resembled Sidney Poitier might be as much a cause for alarm as one in which they all resembled Step'n Fetchit. The counterpart of the "ebony saint" (Bogle) on the other side of the racial divide is of course the ivory demon, i.e., the pathologically vicious racist: Richard Widmark in *No Way Out* (1950) or Bobby Darin in *Pressure Point* (1962). Such films let the "ordinary racist" off the hook, unable to recognize himself in the raving psychopaths on the screen.

Image analysis often ignores the issue of function. Tonto's "positive" image, in the Lone Ranger series, is less important than his structural subordination to the white hero and to expansionist ideology. A certain cynical integrationism, similarly, simply inserts new heroes and heroines, this time drawn from the ranks of the oppressed, into the old functional roles that were themselves oppressive, much as colonialism invited a few assimilated "natives" to join the club of the "elite." Films such as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Pressure Point* (1962), the *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984, 1987) series with Eddie Murphy, and, more complexly, *Deep Cover* (1992), place black characters in the role of law-enforcers. The ideological function of such images resembles that pointed out in Barthes' famous analysis of the *Paris Match* cover featuring a black soldier in French army uniform, eyes upraised, saluting what is presumed to be the French flag. The message, as Barthes points out, is that all citizens, regardless of their colour, can serve law and order, and the black soldier's zeal in serving the established law is the best answer to critics, black and white, of that society.

#### PERSPECTIVE, ADDRESS, FOCALIZATION

A "positive image approach" also ignores the question of perspective and address. We cannot equate the stereotyping performed "from above" with stereotyping "from below," where the stereotype is used as it were "in quotes," recognized as a stereotype but forming part of a strategy

<sup>39</sup> Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society*, 8 (1986), p. 239.

<sup>40</sup> The recent Supreme Court decision recognized *santeria* as a legitimate religion and was in this sense a landmark event.

<sup>41</sup> Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> See Pieterse, *White on Black* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), p. 207.

that mocks both the group itself and the stereotypes projected on to the group. The Chicano group "Culture Clash" invokes stereotypes about Chicanos, but always within a sympathetic Chicano perspective. The notion of positive images disallows "insider satire," i.e., the affectionate self-mockery by which an ethnic group makes fun of itself. Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988) subverts the segregationist connotations of the all-black-musical, fostering instead a space in which to explore intra-racial class tensions in the African-American community. Instead of the usual community-delegate status of Afro-Americans within mainstream cinema, *School Daze* liberates narrative space for the playing out of the contradictions of a heterogeneous community, demonstrating the confidence of a director who, whatever his blindspots (especially in terms of gender and sexuality), is ready to give voice to a polyphony of conflicting voices.

A "positive image" approach also elides issues of point-of-view and what Gerard Genette calls "focalization." Genette's reformulation of the classical literary question of "point of view" points beyond character perspective to the structuring of information within the story world through the cognitive-perceptual grid of its "inhabitants."<sup>43</sup> This concept becomes productive especially for liberal films which furnished the "other" with a "positive" image, charismatic dialogue and sporadic point-of-view shots, but where European or American characters become<sup>44</sup> radiating "centers of consciousness" and "filters" for information, the vehicles for dominant racial/ethnic discourses. Many liberal Hollywoodian films about the Third World or about minoritarian cultures in the First World, for example, deploy a European or Euro-American character as mediating "bridge" to other cultures portrayed more or less sympathetically. The first world journalist in *Under Fire* (1983), *Salvador* (1986), *Missing* (1982), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983), and *Circles of Deceit* (1982) inherits the "in-between" role traditionally assigned to the colonial traveller, and later to the anthropologist, i.e., the role of the one who "reports back." In early ethnographic films the anthropologist served as "mediator" between the western spectators and the alien culture on the screen. In the Western, what Richard Slotkin calls the "man-who-knows-Indians" mediated between "civilization" and "savagery."<sup>45</sup> The mediating character initiates the spectator into otherized communities. The politics of mediation imply that Third World and minoritarian people are incapable of speaking for themselves. Unworthy of stardom either in the movies or in political life, they need a go-between in the struggle for emancipation. They cannot represent themselves, as Marx said of the proletariat, "they must be represented."

The focalized character whose point-of-view predominates need not be the "carrier" of what Boris Uspensky calls the "norms of the text." Oswaldo Censoni's *Joao Negrinho* (1954), for example, is entirely structured around the perspective of its focal character, an elderly ex-slave. But while the film apparently presents all events from Joao's point of view so as to elicit total sympathy,

what the film elicits sympathy for is in fact a paternalistic vision in which "good" blacks are to leave their destiny in the hands of well-intentioned white abolitionists. One finds a related ambiguity in liberal films which privilege European mediators over their Third World object of sympathy — the Palestinians in *Hanna K.* (1983), the Indians in *Passage to India* (1984), the African Americans in *Mississippi Burning*, the Native Americans in *Soldier Blue* (1970), the Nicaraguans in *Under Fire*. In such films, the Third World characters have a subsidiary function, even though their plight is the thematic focus of the film. Filmic liberalism, in sum, does not allow oppressed people to play prominent self-determining roles, a refusal homologous to liberal distaste for aggressive non-mediated self-assertion in the political realm. *Hanna K.*, like other recent Middle East thrillers, such as *Circles of Deceit* and *The Little Drummer Girl* (1984), has its First World protagonist (Jill Clayburgh) explain Third World oppression in order to make the film's didactic thrust palatable to a Western audience as the *enfant gate* of the apparatus. Dialogue and mise-en-scene construct her narrative dominance, aligning the spectator with her apolitical humanism. At the same time, the equation of knowledge between spectator and protagonist which makes possible the film's pedagogical strategy. In the *bildungsroman* chronicling Hanna's journey from ignorance to awareness of political and sexual inequalities, the spectator's consciousness gradually becomes inseparable from Hanna's. In such films all the ideological points of view — both Palestinian and Israeli in *Hanna K.*, North American and Nicaraguan in *Under Fire* — are integrated into the authoritative liberal perspective of the narrator-focalizer who, godlike, oversees and evaluates all the positions. In such films, the Third World characters have a subsidiary function, even though their plight is the thematic focus of the film. Filmic liberalism, in sum, does not allow oppressed people to play prominent self-determining roles, a refusal homologous to liberal distaste for non-media self-assertion in the political realm.

Some recent films practise a slightly more progressive twist on this *bildungsroman* technique. *Thunderheart* (1991), a film about the struggle of the Oglala-Sioux against FBI repression, is focalized through a character whose very sense of self-identity is radically transformed during the course of the film. The hybrid character, the FBI agent (Val Kilmer), who at first denies the Native-American side of his identity — he has a Native American grandfather — evolves into a pro-Native American fighter. The spectator accustomed to liberal point-of-view conventions is surprised to find that the "norms of the text" evolve dramatically during the course of the film. Whereas Hanna in *Hanna K.* merely learns more about the world, but without fundamentally altering her structure of thought, the FBI agent in *Thunderheart* undergoes a fundamental change in orientation. Affected by what he learns on the Sioux reservation, illuminated by visions, he switches cultural/political allegiance, bringing the spectator with him.



# CINEMATIC MEDIATIONS

The privileging of social portrayal, plot and character has often led to the slighting of the specifically cinematic dimensions of the films; the analyses often might easily have been of novels or plays rather than films. A thoroughgoing analysis has to pay attention to "mediations": narrative structure, genre conventions, cinematic style. Eurocentric discourse might be relayed not by characters or plot but rather by the lighting, the framing, the mise-en-scene, the music. Some basic questions have to do with the *rappports de force*, the balance of power as it were, between foreground and background. Within the visual arts, space has traditionally been deployed to express the dynamics of authority and prestige. In pre-perspectival Medieval painting, for example, size was correlated with social status; nobles were large, peasants small. The cinema translates these correlations onto registers of foreground/background, on-screen/off-screen, speaking/non-speaking. Thus, it is impossible to speak of the "image" of a group, without asking such questions as: How much space do they occupy in the shot? Are they seen in close-ups or only in distant long shots? How often do they appear compared with the Euro-American characters and for how long? Are they active, desiring characters or only decorative props? Are the eyeline matches within the shot designed to flatter one character rather than another? Whose looks are reciprocated, whose ignored? How do character positionings communicate social distance or differences in status? How do body language, posture, facial expression, communicate social hierarchies, arrogance, servility, resentment, pride? Which community is sentimentalized? Is there an aesthetic segregation whereby one group is haloed and the other villainized? Are there subtle hierarchizations conveyed by temporality, subjectivization? What are the homologies that inform artistic and ethnic/political representation? A sensitive analysis must also be alive to the contradictions between the different registers of the film. *Jungle Fever*, according to Ed Guerrero, rhetorically condemns interracial love and yet "spreads the fever" by making it cinematically appealing in terms of lighting and mise-en-scene.<sup>46</sup>

Point-of-view and the ethnic/ethnic "norms of the text" can also be transmitted through sound and music rather than character. As a multi-track audio-visual medium, the cinema manipulates not only point-of-view but also what Michel Chion calls "point-of-hearing" (*point-d'ecoute*).<sup>47</sup> In colonial adventure films, the environment and the "natives" are heard as if through the ears of the colonizers. When we as spectators accompany the settlers' gaze over landscapes from which emerge the sounds of native drums, the drum-sound is usually presented as libidinous or threatening. In many Hollywood films, African polyrhythms become aural signifiers of encircling savagery, acoustic shorthand for the racial paranoia implicit in the phrase "the natives are restless." What is seen as spiritual and musical expression within Native American, African or Arab cultures becomes in the western or adventure film

a stenographic index of danger, a motive for fear and loathing. In a film such as *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), the "bad" Indian drums are foiled by the "good" martial Euro-American drums evocative of the beneficent Law and Order of white, Christian patriarchy. Colonialist films associate the colonized with hysterical screams, non-articulate cries, the yelping of animal-like creatures; the sounds themselves place beast and native on the same level, not only as neighbours but also as species-equals. Alternative films deploy sound and music quite differently. A number of African and Afro-diasporic films, such as *Faces of Women* (1985), *Barravento* (1962), *Pagador de Promesas* (1962) and *Sankofa* (1993) deploy drum-overtures in ways that affirm African cultural values.

By lubricating the spectatorial psyche and oiling the wheels of narrative continuity, music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, is crucial for spectatorial identification. Music "conducts" our emotional responses, regulates our sympathies, extracts our tears, excites our glands, relaxes our pulses, and triggers our fears, in conjunction with the image and in the service of the larger purposes of the film. In whose favour, then, do these processes operate? What is the emotional tonality of the music and with what character or group does it lead us to identify? Is the music that of the people portrayed? The choice of European symphonic music in films set in Africa such as *Out of Africa* (1985) and *Ashanti* (1979) tells us that their emotional "heart" is in the West. Films by African and Afro-diasporic directors like Sembene, Cisse, and Faye, in contrast, not only use African music but celebrate it. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* deploys an African "talking drum" to drive home, if only subliminally, the Afrocentric thrust of a film dedicated to the diasporic culture of the Gullah people.

Another key mediation is generic. Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1942) raises the question of what one might call the "generic coefficient" of racism. In this summa of cinematic genres, blacks play very distinct roles, each correlated with a specific generic discourse. In the slapstick land-yacht sequences, the black waiter conforms to the prototype of the happy-go-lucky servant-buffoon; he is sadistically "painted" with white-face pancake batter, and cruelly excluded from the charmed circle of white

<sup>43</sup> See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Translated by Jane E. Lewin, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> This is true as well for films set in "exotic" lands. In *The King and I* (1956), for example, the spectator discovers and is initiated into the Orient quite literally through the point of view of the European cultural missionary, whose initial fears of the mysterious land are summarized by the song "Whenever I Feel Afraid;" the spectator is then introduced to Siamese "manners" and "customs" through the discourse of the European civilizing mission.

<sup>45</sup> See Richard Slotkin, *Gunslinger Nation* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> See Ed Guerrero, "Fever in the Racial Jungle," in Jim Collins, et al. *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Michel Chion, *Le Son au Cinema* (Paris: Cahiers, 1985).

sociality. In the documentary-inflected sequences showing masses of unemployed, meanwhile, blacks are present but voiceless, very much in the left-communist tradition of class reductionism; blacks appear as anonymous victims of the economic depression, with no racial specificity to their oppression. The most remarkable sequence, an homage to the "all-black musical" tradition, has a black preacher and his congregation welcome the largely white prison-inmates to the screening of an animated cartoon. Here, in the tradition of films like *Hallelujah* (1929), the black community is portrayed as the vibrant scene of expressive religiosity. But the film complicates conventional representation, first by desegregating the genre, and second, by having blacks exercise charity toward whites. The collective singing of "Let My People Go," in conjunction with the editing, meanwhile, forges a triadic link between three oppressed groups: blacks, the prisoners, and the Biblical Israelites in the times of the Pharaoh, here assimilated to the cruel warden. The Sturges who directs the slapstick sequence, in sum, is not the same Sturges who directs the "black musical" sequence; racial attitudes are generically mediated.

The critique of stereotypes approach is implicitly premised on the desirability of "rounded" three-dimensional characters within a realist-dramatic aesthetic. Given the history of one-dimensional portrayals, the hope for more complex and "realistic" representations is completely understandable, but the option for realistic portrayals should not preclude more experimental, anti-illusionistic alternatives. Realistic "positive" portrayals are not the only way to fight racism or advance a liberatory perspective. Within a Brechtian aesthetic, for example, (non-racial) stereotypes serve to generalize meaning and demystify established power. Parody of the kind theorized by Bakhtin, similarly, favours decidedly negative, even grotesque images conveying a deep critique of societal structures. At times, the criteria appropriate to one genre or aesthetic are mistakenly applied to another. A search for positive images in shows like *In Living Color*, for example, would be fundamentally misguided, for that show belongs to a carnivalesque genre favouring anarchic bad taste and calculated exaggeration, as in the parody of *West Side Story*, where the black woman lead sings to her orthodox lover: "Mena-chem, Mena-chem, I just met a man named Mena-chem." The Coco Fusco/Gomez Pena performance piece in which they exhibit themselves as "authentic aborigines" mocks the Western penchant for sadistically exhibiting non-Europeans for purposes of scientific analysis or aesthetic contemplation, and prods the art world audience into awareness of its own complicity. The point is not a global endorsement of all satire, but simply to say that the question, in such cases, lies not in the valence of the image but rather in the drift of the satire.

One methodological alternative to the mimetic "stereotypes and distortions" approach, I would argue, is to speak less of "images" than of "voices" and "discourses." The very term "image studies," symptomatically, elides the oral and the "voiced." A predilection for aural and musical metaphors — voices, intonation, accent, polyphony —

reflects a shift in attention, as George Yudice suggests, from the visually predominant logical space of modernity (perspective, empirical evidence, domination of the gaze) to a "postmodern" space of the vocal (oral ethnography, peoples history, slave narratives), as ways of restoring voice to the voiceless. The concept of voice suggests a metaphor of seepage across boundaries which, like sound in the cinema, remodels spatiality itself, while the visual organization of space, with its limits and boundaries and border police, forms a metaphor of exclusions and hierarchical arrangements. It is not my purpose to merely reverse existing hierarchies — i.e., to replace the demagoguery of the visual with a new demagoguery of the auditory — rather, voice (and sound) and image should be considered together, dialectically and diacritically. But a more nuanced discussion of race/ethnicity in the cinema would emphasize less a one-to-one mimetic adequacy to sociological or historical truth than the interplay of voices, discourses, perspectives, including those operative within the image itself. The task of the critic would be to call attention to the cultural voices at play, not only those heard in aural "close-up" but also those voices distorted or drowned out by the text. The analytic work would be analogous to that of a "mixer" in a sound studio, whose responsibility it is to perform a series of compensatory operations, of heightening the treble, deepening the bass, or amplifying the instrumentation, i.e., in cultural terms, of "bringing out" the voices which remain latent or displaced.

Formulating the issue as one of voices/discourses helps us get past the "lure" of the visual, to look beyond the epidermic surface of the text. The question, quite literally, is not of the colour of the face in the image but rather of the actual or figurative social voice speaking "through" the image.<sup>18</sup> Less important than a film's "accuracy" is that it relay the voices and the perspectives — I emphasize the plural — of the community or communities in question. While "image" evokes the issue of mimetic realism, "voice" evokes a realism of delegation and interlocution, a situated utterance of "speaking from" and "speaking to." If an identification with a community voice/discourse occurs, the question of "positive" images falls back into its rightful place as a subordinate issue. We might look at Spike Lee's films, for example, not in terms of mimetic "accuracy" e.g., the lament that *Do the Right Thing* (1989) portrays an inner-city untouched by drugs — but rather in terms of voices/discourses. We can lament, as bell hooks rightly does, the absence of a feminist voice in the film, but we can also note the film's repeated stagings of wars of community rhetorics. The symbolic battle of the boom boxes featuring African American and Latino music, for example, evokes a larger tension between cultural and musical voices. And the final intertitles juxtaposing quotations from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X leave it to the spectator to synthesize two modalities of resistance, one of which says: "Freedom, as you promised," and the other of which says: "Freedom, by any means necessary!"

It might be objected that an analysis of textual "voices" would ultimately run into the same theoretical problems





*Cabin In The Sky*

as an analysis centred on "images." Why would it be any easier to determine an "authentic voice" than it would be to determine an "authentic image?" The point is to abandon the language of "authenticity/inauthenticity," with its implicit standard of appeal to verisimilitude as a kind of "gold standard" for the "real," in favour of a language of "discourses" with its implicit reference to community affiliation and to intertextuality. Reformulating the question as one of "voices"/"discourses" has a number of advantages. First, it disputes the hegemony of the visual and of the image-track by calling attention to sound, voice, dialogue, language. A voice, we might add, is not exactly congruent with a discourse, for while discourse is institutional, transpersonal, unauthored, voice is personalized, having authorial accent and intonation, and constitutes a specific interplay of discourses (whether individual or communal). Second, the notion of voice is open to plurality; a voice is never merely a voice; it also relays a discourse, since even an individual voice is itself a discursive sum, a polyphony of voices. What Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" (many-languagedness), after all, is just another name for the socially generated contradictions that constitute the subject, like the media, as the site of conflicting discourses and competing voices. It is revealing, in this regard, that the "voice of the other" is more easily mimicked than the appearance. Stand-up comics such as Whoopie Goldberg and Billy Crystal easily perform a kind of racial ventriloquism by adopting the voice of the racial other — Goldberg impersonates (presumably white) valley girls, and Billy Crystal impersonates (presumably black) jazz musicians — while the equivalent transformation on a visual plane would have been more awkward and less convincing.

Third, a discursive approach avoids the moralistic and essentialist traps embedded in a "negative stereotypes" and "positive images" analysis. Characters are not seen as unitary essences, as actor-character amalgams too easily phantasmized as flesh-and-blood entities existing somewhere "behind" the diegesis, but rather as fictive-discursive constructs, thus placing the whole issue on a socio-ideological rather than on an individual-moralistic plane. Finally, the privileging of the discursive allows us to compare a film's discourses not with an inaccessible "real" but rather with other socially-circulated cognate discourses forming part of a discursive continuum — journalism, novels, network news, television shows, political speeches, scholarly essays, and popular songs.

A discursive analysis would also alert us to the dangers of "pseudo-polyphonic" discourse, one which marginalizes and disempowers certain voices, and then pretends to dialogue with a puppet-like entity already manoeuvred into crucial compromises. Polyphonic equality does not consist in the mere appearance of a representative of a given group but rather in the fostering of a textual setting where that group's voice can be heard with its full force and resonance. The question is not one of pluralism but one of multi-vocality, an approach which would strive to cultivate and even heighten cultural difference while abolishing socially-generated inequalities.

<sup>48</sup> Two of Clyde Taylor's defining traits of New Black Cinema — the link to the Afro-American oral tradition and the strong articulation of black musicality — are aural in nature, and both are indispensable in black cinema's search for what Taylor himself calls "its voice." See *cinema noir*, "CineAction, No. 46 (1988).

# Between the Borders of Cultural Identity:

BY RON BURNETT

## Atom Egoyan's *Calendar*

*To look:*

*at everything which overflows the outline, the contour, the category, the name of what is.*

*All appearances are continually changing one another: visually everything is interdependent.*

*Looking is submitting the sense of sight to the experience of that interdependence.*

*To look for something (a pin that has dropped) is the opposite of this looking. Visibility is a quality of light.*

*Colours are faces of light.*

John Berger, "On Visibility."<sup>1</sup>

In *Calendar*,

Atom Egoyan plays the role of a photographer whose assignment is to take twelve pictures of historic sites in Armenia for a calendar. Arsinée Khanjian plays his wife, guide and interpreter. The film takes place in Armenia and Toronto.

I have come to realize that Atom Egoyan's films must be understood as the continuing construction of an open ended oeuvre. All of his films are interlinked. Sometimes, it seems that he is writing an extended essay on the cinema and television (*Family Viewing* and *Speaking Parts*). Other times his films are like





extracts from a series of diaries about images, loss and a postmodern context bereft of meaning (*Next of Kin*, *The Adjuster* and *Calendar*). His films search through the living ruins of modern cultural history in much the same manner as an archeologist digs for evidence of a culture's past. The difference is that his tools are images, and images are "light" — a shifting, groundless place where "Clouds gather visibility and then disperse into invisibility. All appearances are of the nature of clouds."<sup>2</sup> Yet even as this "lightness" recreates the premises of the visible (and how we are able to understand it), Egoyan continues to use the mediums of film and television to explore history and identity. The pursuit is a noble one, but as *Calendar* so deftly reveals, the result may be one long travelogue where the sensibility of the tourist dominates. There is a strange irony to Egoyan's decision to use himself as one of the main characters of the film. He implicates himself in an auto-critique of the desires which have governed his relationship to photography and the cinema. He puts himself on the line in a kind of Brechtian play with divided loyalties that break apart and destroy the flimsy foundations of authorship.

I have recently discussed Egoyan's use of images in an introductory essay on *Speaking Parts*.<sup>3</sup> In the above quote John Berger captures some of the ironies with regard to any analysis of images. His use of a metaphor drawn from nature is not accidental, of course. Egoyan spends a great deal of time in *Calendar* exploring the act of taking a photograph of historical buildings in Armenia (his country of origin), churches and fortresses, for example, within picturesque natural environments. Although these places are beautiful with rich colour tones, wildflowers and sun-baked fields, they are "tourist" images for which some anecdotal history is provided, but where the depth seems to be missing. In fact, what becomes important as we look at the old buildings is not so much their connection to the past, but the role they play in triggering questions about the two characters whom the photographer is dependent on for guidance and information. One is a woman with whom the photographer (played by Egoyan) is in love and who is identified as his wife, and the other is an Armenian driver who acts out the role of the local "informant." The photographs are ostensibly being taken for a calendar, but in essence we are witnesses over time to the breakdown of the photographer's relationship to his wife and by extension to Armenia. Thus, all of the monuments that we see are themselves evidence of what cannot be seen. There are histories in the buildings but they only speak through the voice of the driver. In fact, the

pastoral setting of the images seems incongruent with the war raging in Armenia and with the breakdown of civil life and the economic devastation brought on by the overthrow of communism. How then can this place be spoken of as home? How are national borders defined when identity and place are fluid, moveable and ever changing? Are we the sum total of all of the different nations we now live beside? — all of the different languages we either speak or listen to? How does this hybridization change the spatial and temporal boundaries within which we normally operate?

"A life-testimony is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*."<sup>4</sup> *Calendar* is Egoyan's testimony to his past, as much as it is a story of the efforts by the film's characters to understand their own ethnic history. The film explores the many dimensions of identity, which in the late twentieth century means far more than a simple relationship to the nation-state or the recovery of ancestral connections. The postcolonial and postimperial history we are now experiencing has scrambled the meanings of home and homeland. In Homi Bhabha's terms, another history is being written from within a crisis of the sign where language and meaning, discourse and identity have no firm anchors. Traditional notions of subjectivity have been transformed; this is not simply the movement from one stage to another, but a fundamental split in the operations of time and history.<sup>5</sup> "...today, the rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people combines with the refusal of cultural products and practices to 'stay put' to give a profound sense of a loss of territorial roots, of an erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places...."<sup>6</sup> Gupta and Ferguson go on to quote James Clifford: "What does it mean, at the end of the twentieth century, to speak...of a 'native land'?"

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, "On Visibility" in *The Sense of Sight*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985) p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Ron Burnett, "Speaking Parts," *Speaking Parts*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993) pp. 9-24.

<sup>4</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate," *October*, #61, Summer, 1992, pp. 46-64.

<sup>6</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology*, Volume 7, Number 1, February, 1992, p. 9.



What processes rather than essences are involved in present experiences of cultural identity?"<sup>7</sup>

Hamid Naficy has commented upon the nostalgic desire to return to the homeland and thus to overcome the double loss of "...origin and of reality..."<sup>8</sup> as a driving force inhabited by imaginary constructions which "remains alluring only as long as it remains unrealized."<sup>9</sup> This is of course the dilemma of the diaspora and exile, of cultures which have lost their roots as they have been overrun or destroyed only to be recreated elsewhere, simulated — and I do not mean this pejoratively. In some respects, then, for Egoian we have all become tourists and in the process we have had to develop new ways of dealing with each other which are more often than not mediated by complex technologies such as the camera and the telephone. Salman Rushdie has commented on this in a wonderful anecdote: "A few years ago I revisited Bombay, which is my lost city, after an absence of something like half my life. Shortly after arriving, acting on an impulse, I opened the telephone directory and looked for my father's name. And, amazingly, there it was; his name, our old address, the unchanged telephone number, as if we had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an

eerie discovery. I felt as if I were being claimed, or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, and this continuity was the reality."<sup>10</sup>

Some years ago I found myself at a Cambodian ceremony in Melbourne, Australia. There were about eight hundred people in the gymnasium of an old school which had been taken over by the small but growing exile community of Cambodians in Australia. The gym was decorated with the symbols and colours of the homeland. Everyone was dressed up and the smell of incense was heavy in the air. I remember little of the specifics of the ceremony except for the feeling that I had that we were all in a time warp, transported back into a village, participating in the sounds and rhythms and music of a culture many thousands of years old. I understood then how crucial the nostalgia was, how curative and yet how contradictory. As a particular dance reached its peak the people around me began to cry, and as they comforted each other they seemed to me to be both weak and strong at the same time. This it seems to me is one aspect of exile — the ability to implicate oneself so strongly in the homeland and at the same time to go on, to carve out a new life, to break out of the boundaries of geography and time and yet to remain bound by a history which remains static even as things change both in one's new home



and abroad. This is of course the paradox of loss and the base upon which narratives are built. As Rushdie says, an original moment cannot be reclaimed here with the result that fictions will be created, "imaginary homelands."<sup>11</sup> But this is precisely what Egoyan is exploring. How do those fictions sustain themselves? What are the markers we accept and what happens to the ones we reject? How do photographs operate as a fictional bridge?

I mention this in relation to *Calendar* because of my own background as an immigrant to Canada, as someone who was born elsewhere and for whom that "elsewhere" has never disappeared from the various ways in which I define myself. This very fluid sense of identity is made all the more acute by the situation in Quebec, by the personal signposts which I have for my own past and the efforts by official culture here to eradicate the importance of that history.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the borders *between* official culture as promulgated by government policy and the displacement (psychological, physical, intellectual) which grows from being both a witness and participant to the diasporas of twentieth century life that a film like *Calendar* is situated. The film searches for strategies of talking about identity that will not fall prey to the categories of margin or centre. It longs for some coherence in the transnational space of exile and community. Through a series of often funny conversations the film tries to locate the way time and distance work to generate a mental geography within which the markers more often than not are unstable and unclear. At the same time one of the most interesting aspects of the film is the difficulty that the photographer has in understanding Armenian. Everything his driver says has to be translated. Often, we don't get a translation and conversations take place that we don't comprehend. This is duplicated in the Toronto flat of the photographer where he meets a number of different women in exactly the same setting (...a small dining room table, wine glasses, a bottle of wine...). Each time, they go off to the telephone and have a conversation with their lovers in their own maternal language. We hear everything from Hindi to German to Spanish to Swedish, etc..., and depending on our backgrounds we either understand the conversations or not. In all instances the women stand near the calendar, which had been produced from the Armenian scenes we witnessed the photographer shooting.

The border region inhabited by Egoyan in this film also pivots on temporal displacement. The time

is now but somehow it isn't. The characters seem disconnected from the present, always yearning for something else, for the future, for the past. Yet that is also the paradoxical situation of photography both as an art form and as a means of documenting past and present. "In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow."<sup>13</sup>

Kracauer distinguishes between the photograph of a person and the memory-image. The latter is what is left when the photograph is viewed outside of the time when it is taken. This distinction is a crucial one. It temporalizes the photograph and in so doing heightens the role of discourse, what is said and what isn't said, about images. No photograph escapes the contradictions and potential excitement of temporal dislocation. There are so many movements in space and time, so many moments within which history must be rewritten, that the conceit of truth must be understood not as an ontological basis for interpretation, but as a site where memory is reinvigorated, even when memories slip from fact into fiction and back. The pleasures of seeing in this instance are invested with desiring, to make the memory real, to generate truth, to manufacture a narrative. The truth becomes a metaphor just as quickly as the image disguises its sudden transformative power. The snow melts and there is a dissolution of memory although the photograph remains suggestively encouraging — as if no historical moment will ever again escape its simultaneous role as event and image, memory and potential arena for debate.

Each encounter Egoyan has with a different woman suffers the same fate. He is left alone to contemplate the love he has left behind in Armenia. In that sense he is locked into a history which is only real within a false kind of romanticism. As in nearly all of his other films the telephone is a device of contact and breakdown, a metaphor for distance and connection. As a technology the telephone is per-

<sup>11</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 275.

<sup>12</sup> Hamid Naficy, "The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia Exile," *Diaspora*, Volume 1, #3, 1991, p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> Naficy, p. 286.

<sup>14</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, (New York: Viking, 1991) p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> See the recent collection, *Boundaries of Identity: A Quebec Reader*, (Toronto: Lester, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Spring, 1993: 426.

haps the most important contributor to the creation of a public space within which the private fantasy of communication and interaction can be sustained and through which it is often denied. This, I think, is also the role which is played by photography. Distance can be overcome but the photographic print must be narrativized if links between past and present are to be established.

*Calendar* is a film in twelve movements, built around the photographs accompanying the months of the year. But the film is really about the memories of times past, when an image somehow connected to its referent and when notions of home and church and tradition could be addressed from within a set of foundations as solid as the buildings we see in the film. Ironically, as the Armenian driver becomes the historian and more fully represents all that is missing from the image, from the photographs, Khanjian falls in love with him. Egoyan is left to his devices in the dining room of his Toronto house or in the darkroom trying to reconstruct a world which, as his own images suggest, has long ago ceased to exist.

## **Call For SUBMISSIONS**

### **Screening the NEW WORLD ORDER**

**How have films and television fictionalized and explored, reproduced or opposed the grim global realities — from Columbus to Clinton's latest proclamation — of a New World Order.**

V  
V  
V

**Analysis of fiction, documentary, news or any genre from any national perspective.**

**>>> Hollywood's picture of America in the world, of the cold war and its end of the "Third World," of race and neo-colonialism. <<<**

**Third Cinema and oppositional practice now.**

A  
A  
A

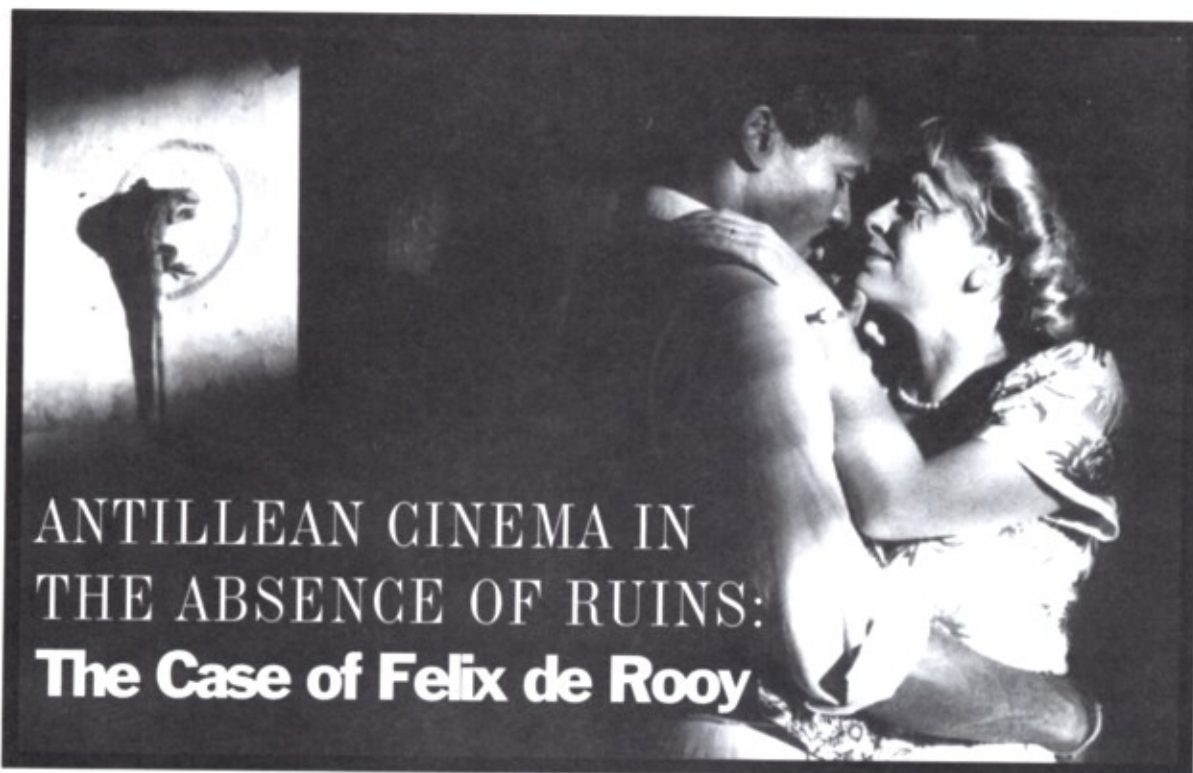
**Deadline: November 15, 1993  
Send To *Cineaction*, Attention S. Forsyth**

### **DEADLINES FOR UPCOMING ISSUES:**

**Film and/in Art  
February 1, 1994**

**Queer Cinema,  
May 1, 1994**





## ANTILLEAN CINEMA IN THE ABSENCE OF RUINS: The Case of Felix de Rooy

BY REECE AUGUISTE

IN the realms of cinema discourse and film criticism the ongoing interventions being made by third cinema theorists undoubtedly represent a significant counter hegemonic critique of the dominant Euro-American axis of cinema studies. This body of theoretical writing has had the efficacy of foregrounding the historical and cultural significance of emerging national cinemas as a distinctive epistemological site, posing complex questions pertaining to discourses of national identity, geo-cultural location/dislocation and its oppositionality to western regimes of truth and morality. However, because this oppositionality rests on historical/cultural binaries conditioned by the relationship between the "centre and the periphery," there exists a need to develop categories capable of going beyond those binaries.<sup>1</sup>

For me the philosophical implications inherent in third cinema narratives provide a starting point from which theorists and critics can begin postulating questions of metaphysics, identity and subjectivity as they evolve within the parameters of national cinemas. Although the socioeconomic imperative of production is equally important as a site of theoretic-

cal investigation, I am here concerned with philosophical and mythological tropes as key defining moments in the narrative evolution of third cinema. The emergence of Antillean cinema and the films of Felix de Rooy represent one of those key defining moments, because those narratives are framed and foregrounded by a reworking of legends, mythologies and parables. The dominance of these tropes as strategic organizing elements in the construction of de Rooy's films is an expression of the cultural terrain from which the Antillean cinema emanates.

Creolization, hybridity, the fusion of races, mixing of blood, religions, languages and culture are de Rooy's primary concerns. In the absence of any visible ruins the poets of the Antillean cinema have made the creolization process an object of study, and

<sup>1</sup> This is a problem that Teshome H. Gabriel has discussed at length in his seminal essay: "Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and The Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey" in *Black Frames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, ed. Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade Watkins. (MIT Press, 1988), pp. 62-79.

In this essay Gabriel announced the emergence of a travelling cinema or post-cinema with a new set of priorities/realities standing outside the paradigms of dominant and oppositional cinema.

this is probably the key difference between the lyric poet and the poets of Antillean cinema.

"The epic-minded poet looks around these islands and finds no ruins, wind-bitten or sea-bitten, the poet celebrates what little there is, the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, canon, chains, the crust-ed amphora of cut throats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, not as masochism, as if the ovens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the temples of the race."<sup>2</sup>

Instead of searching for ruins as the visible emblems of suffering, barbarism and cultural deracination, Antillean cinema looks instead to the results of confrontation for its subject matter. Written on the Antillean body is the grammar of survival, adaptation and acculturation. And no where is this more visible than on soulscapes of the "internal plantation."<sup>3</sup> It is an interior that is defined by racial phantoms, colonial fantasies and power relations framed by the complexes of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. On the "inner plantation" one finds the monuments of language, cultural fusion, religion and mythology; the essence and heartbeat of the Creole subject.

Nevertheless, the "internal plantation" remains largely unexplored by the cinema. I believe there are two reasons for this. First, undoubtedly discourses of the "external plantation," by which I mean political history, patterns of mercantile trade, race relations, the economic rationalism of slavery and its legacies of underdevelopment and post-colonial dependency, continue to both obsess and fascinate the Antillean imagination. This experience is what Wilson Harris calls "a graveyard of sculptured history and misadventure." Haunted by it, the Antillean is compelled to return to this primordial scene. Second, cinema and other mediums of the visual arts have internalized the "external plantation" discourses as tropes of narrative signification. All this was historically inevitable because it was predicated on the belief that the conquest of the present and future entails an ongoing engagement with the past.

As significant and historically important as these concerns have been in developing a substantial critique of the structures of the plantocratic domination, deracination and a later assimilation in the Antilles, the general absence/lack of philosophical inquiry into the role of subjectivity, the ontological self in the construction of identity in language and cultural formation means that there is an urgency to address these in Antillean cinema.

Franz Fanon's phenomenological inquiry into the existential status of the Antillean subject is, I believe, a fruitful point of departure for the emerging Antillean cinema. As I will demonstrate later in my reading of de Rooy's feature *Ava & Gabriel*, it should be apparent how the film's plot, narrative drives and characterizations are framed by Fanonian concepts of cultural location and identity. In fact, the "internal plantation" is predominantly a Fanonian space, in which there have been a number of experiments in literature and painting.

Its presence has been felt in the fury and beauty of Walcott and Césaire's poetry, in the passions and subliminal terrors of Wilfredo Lam's paintings, in particular his 1945 masterpiece *The Antillean Parade*, and in Jean Rhys's literary masterpiece of the Creole imagination *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Rhys's universe, phantoms of memory appear and disappear with frightening frequency, subjects of the plantocratic class disintegrate into a labyrinth of decadence, beauty and decay suffocates the senses, and everything leads inexorably to madness and existential death. It is my belief that these compelling tropes with their visual intensities are specific to particular modes of perception and cultural orientation defined as the "internal plantation," the terrain of contradictory omens and cultural excess.

This is the cultural context out of which filmmakers as diverse as Euzan Palcy of Martinique and Felix de Rooy have emerged. In Palcy's internationally acclaimed first feature *Rue Cases Negres*, audiences glimpsed the possibilities of an Antillean cinema. The film is predicated on a narrative quest for recognition, self-affirmation and a break from plantocratic existence. Here characters are haunted by bitter memories of sugar cane fields, where the black body is an economic unit of production, the excesses of the white plantocracy, miscegenation, psychic splits and colonial schizophrenia fuelled by racial and sexual anxieties.

The film's complex archaeology of racial codes and existential states encapsulates the phenomenological experience of a "double consciousness," which functions as a psychic expression of a cultural decentredness feeding on racial traumas.

<sup>2</sup> R.O.E. Burton, "Derek Walcott and The Medusa of History," in *Caliban: A Journal of New Thought and Writing*, Vol. 3, No. 2, fall/winter, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> This notion was, to my knowledge, first coined by the Caribbean poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his essay: "The Caribbean Man In Space And Time." In *Carifesta Forum: An Anthology of 20 Caribbean Voices*, ed. with an introduction by John Hearn (Institute of Jamaica, 1976), p. 203. (I am deeply indebted to him for this revelation.)





*Ava & Gabriel*, Cliff San-A-Jong and Nashaira Desbarida

W. E. B. Dubois describes this state in *The Souls Of Black Folk*:

"It is a peculiar sensation... this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>4</sup>

I contend that it is this phenomenon that continues to produce the elasticity that makes Antillean identity in the cinema a revelation and source of narrative inquiry. But whereas Palcý's film announces these complex psychosocial states, de Rooy's films *Almacita*, *Soul of Desolato* and *Ava & Gabriel* represent a more rigorous exploration of the Antillean landscape. In de Rooy's films the tragic and the mythological co-exist as optical devices through which the Antillean soul can be revealed as torn between reason and passion as it struggles to ascend on a crest of power and excess. Driven by Dionysian concerns, de Rooy's narratives are explorations of the self, the body and the powers of transgression. Racial and sexual codes are subverted by the archetypal status of mythological tropes and legends. In deploying these devices, de Rooy achieves a complex

recasting of Antillean identity: sexual, racial, historical. Identity is in free-fall, nothing is fixed, everything is fluid and mercurial. These films are driven by cultural flows, they express Gilles Deleuze's observation that:

"Cinema considered as psychodynamics or spiritual automation is reflected in its own content, its themes, situations and characters. But the relationship is complicated, because this reflection gives way to oppositions and inversion as well as to resolutions or reconciliations."<sup>5</sup>

As in his paintings and collages, Deleuze's notion of "spiritual automation" finds an echo in de Rooy's cinema, with Curacao as the landscape that continues to fire his imagination and in turn gives substance to his vision of a cinema with distinctive con-

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls Of Black Folk*, (New York: Bantam Books, rpt. 1989), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> I believe that Deleuze is one of the great philosophers, whose ideas on cinema have had a profound impact on my own understanding of the medium. His theory on perception and the construction of the image is most valuable. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2 - The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: The Athlone Press, 1989), p. 263.

cerns. Those concerns are to do with the mixing of blood, sex, racial fusions, religions and Antillean mythologies. In a curious manner it appears that Western reason, framed as it is by Apollonian desires and projection, capitulated to Dionysian drives and excesses in the Antilles. The Antillean experiences of identity is probably symbolic of the struggles of Apollonian and Dionysian desire. It is the presence of Dionysian elements in the narrative construction of *Almacita, Soul of Desolato* that gives the film its epic dreamlike qualities as its protagonists ascend to an epiphanic resolution through resurrection. While in *Ava & Gabriel*, it is the foregrounding of sexuality, miscegenation and biblical messiah mythology that produces the film's climactic moment as Antillean tragedy.

Both films constitute a repudiation of the cinema's tendency to be obsessed with Apollonian narrative concerns, with its over-investment in symmetrical boundaries, textual order, determinacy and "sculptural definitiveness." In other words, dominant cinema is an expression of Apollonian sky-cults, cultural refugees from the Olympian temple. It is here that I believe cinema's master narratives have their origins, in which plot and characterization assumes a regime of truth that is at once authoritarian and ultimately repressive. Here cinema ceases to surprise and is therefore incapable of inventing its own myths. We get, not revelation but a series of formulaic dictums. Camille Paglia's description is apposite here:

"What they repress is the monstrous gigantism of chthonian nature, that murky night world from which society must be reclaimed day by day."<sup>6</sup>

In Pasolini's *Salo, The Trilogy of Life* (i.e., *Medea, The Decameron* and *Arabian Nights*) we have the ascension of chthonian nature. In fact, Pasolini's films are expressions of the Dionysian in cinema. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and Kurosawa's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth, Throne of Blood*, is another case in point.

De Rooy's films and his vision for an Antillean cinema rooted in Dionysian mother-cults is, I believe, inspired by both the creolization process in the Antilles and his cinematic references to those filmmakers whose films are expressions of a Dionysian consciousness. Unity of personality is made redundant and, instead, the shapeless and archaic explosions of chthonian nature, with its pagan and ritualistic desires, becomes the motivation propelling the narratives forward. Prior to the emergence of the Dionysian in Antillean cinema, it had,

of course, already found expression in the annual Caribbean carnival: pagan ritual of excessive desires in which parody, mimicry and political satire find sudden emotional bursts. It is not therefore surprising when in a recent interview de Rooy declared that:

"Lyricism and emotion are essential elements in my work and therefore reflected in my films. Bunuel, Pasolini, Fellini, Camus, Babenco... Lean, Kurosawa are inspiring filmmakers in whom I find the same elements."<sup>7</sup>

My argument is for the reclaiming for the cinema the Dionysian elements in Antillean culture and of dramatizing those elements with the emotional and lyrical transparency that we encounter in Derek Walcott's poetry. I also contend that if Antillean cinema embraces the forms, conventions and narrative concerns of Apollo, then the Antilles is impoverished. But by embracing the Dionysian imagination, the Antillean filmmaker would be constructing a cinema of passion in which plot will emanate out of primordial energies, and characters would represent/articulate the cataclysmic elements of the culture. Again, Paglia adroitly maps out the tension:

Dionysus is identification, Apollo objectification. Dionysus is the emphatic, the sympathetic emotion transporting us into other people, other places, other times....(it) is energy, ecstasy, hysteria, promiscuity, emotionalism, heedless indiscriminateness of idea and practice. Apollo is obsessiveness, voyeurism, idolatry, fascism - frigidity and aggression of the eve, petrification of objects.<sup>8</sup>

Because Dionysian is also defined in terms of cataclysm, fluidity and spontaneity, and is an expression of mother-cult, earth itself, the implication is that the Dionysian imagination is rooted in nomadic discourse(s). In fact, Dionysus is nomadic, it exists outside of boundaries and acknowledges only the desire to travel, the importance of memory and a complex constellation of cosmological arrangements. Myths, legends, fables and the unwritten replaces discourses

<sup>6</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 73.

Paglia's uses of classicism as a starting point to trace the development of popular culture in terms of a struggle between Apollonian sky-cults and Dionysian earth-cult represent a major intervention in how we think about the construction of the subject/object in cultural development.

<sup>7</sup> Felix de Rooy, Felix de Rooy Festival Dossier, *Almacita, Soul Of Desolato*, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Paglia, p. 96.



of rationality, the Apollonian temple of reason and order.

Because of this the Antillean, the hybrid, the Creole is a manifestation of nomadic consciousness. They are, in fact, New World nomads responding to New World experiences of cultural adaptation, fragmentation and dislocation. Their quest is to understand the fragmentation process. In this context de Rooy's films are expressive of the Creole imagination and existential experience. Their creolization process is a phenomenon unique to the New World and is an integral component of Antillean existence. It is that which best defines it. It is defined by a complex dialectical, syncretic process best borne out of deracination and cultural genocide. Europe's encounter with aboriginal civilization of the Caribbean and America can only be understood as instances of terror and submission. In other words, deracination: an attempt to obliterate memory. That was the object of the white plantocratic class and the existential horrors of the middle passage. The black body was later to be reconstituted as a *tabula rasa* upon which a complex vocabulary and grammar of Creole existence could be written. Existence therefore becomes something fluid and syncretic. Creolization is therefore the grammar of brutality, miscengenation, negotiation, racial fusion/exclusion, mimicry and parody. European, African and Amerindian cross-pollinate, hybridity is born, a drama of Dionysian excess.

It is this drama of encounters that de Rooy has often referred to as a "colonial orgasm," the recognition that the Antillean is a product of this orgasmic flow — the mixing of blood, language and culture. As an Antillean artist, de Rooy is himself a product of this "colonial orgasm," and his films are emblematic of this existential experience. In other words, de Rooy approximates C.L.R. James's notion of the ideal artist:

A supreme artist exercises an influence on the national consciousness which is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future.<sup>9</sup>

As has already been noted, *Almatica, Soul of Desolato* is the most dreamlike of his two films; it expresses most clearly Bergman's insight that when "cinema is not document, it is dream." Its hermetic resonance is what makes this film magical and revelatory. As Nietzsche suggests:

"Nothing is more your own than your dreams. Nothing more than your own work...content, form, duration, performer, spectator - in these comedies you are all of this yourself."<sup>10</sup>

*Almatica, Soul of Desolato* is an exploration of the ancient messiah myth through an epic narrative structure in which de Rooy uses cinematic techniques that best serve the epic tale. The first in a trilogy, de Rooy recently declared that *Almatica* mythologically announced the messiah, that he was given shape in *Ava and Gabriel* and is to be manifested in the next film:

The basis of a culture is the way it deals with the essences of life, eroticism, death and the magical and religious elements which forms it. As an artist and filmmaker you cannot escape the essential influence of these elements.<sup>11</sup>

*Almatica, Soul of Desolato* expresses chthonian nature's struggle between creative and destructive powers, good and evil, life and death. One of its key organizing tropes is the theme of travel; existence is again defined in terms of flows, journeys, and what Teshome T. Gabriel refers to as "travelling aesthetics," in his inquiry in nomadic discourse as an epistemological site for the development of an "alternative aesthetics of black independent cinema."

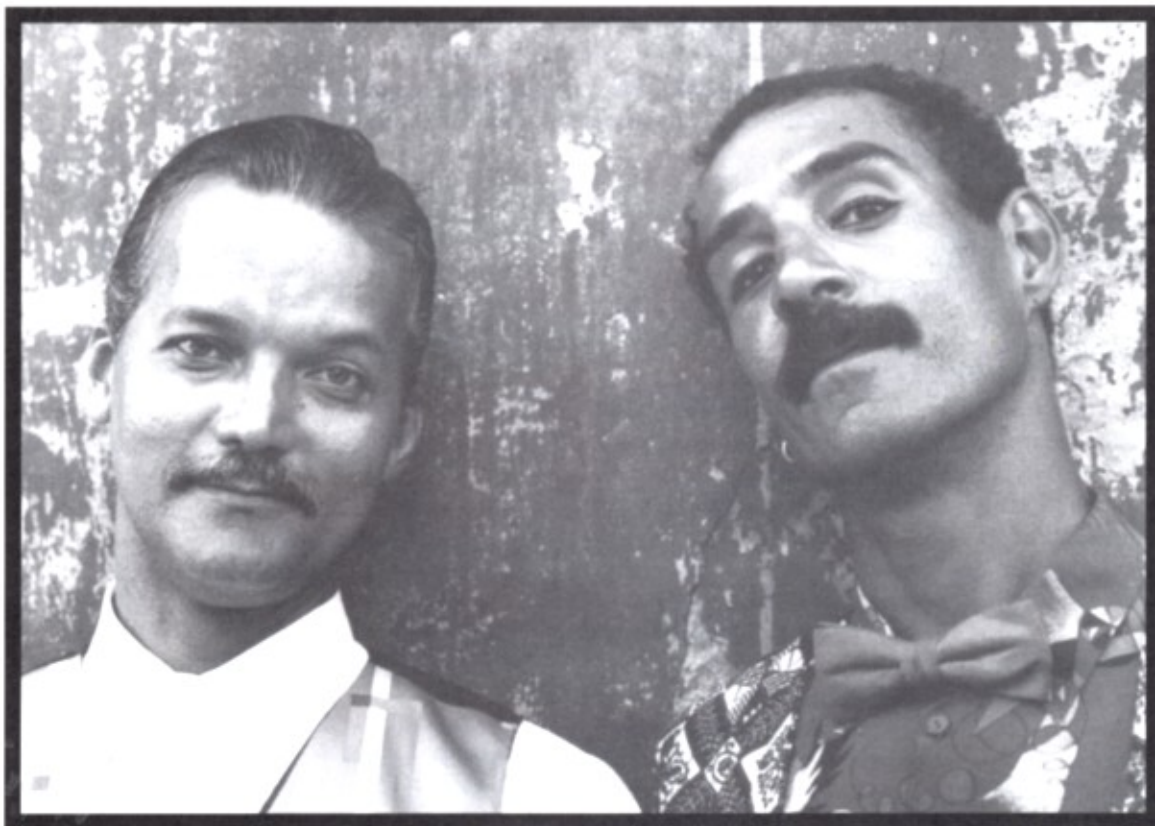
*Almatica, Soul of Desolato* is set in Curacao at the turn of the century among an agrarian community of former slaves in the village of Desolato, with the life of its inhabitants intertwined in magic, ritual, religion and self-sufficiency. With the ontological status of former slaves the community has constructed a society far removed from the racially codified existence of the "shons" — the white plantocratic class, their former masters. But with Alma Sola, patriarch of the "shons" and the personification of evil roaming the red earthen plains which circulates Desolato like a net, the people of Desolato forbid all contact with the "shons."

But Alma Sola's identity goes further than a mere symbolic representation of evil. His identity is defined in terms of fluidity and flows, and invested

<sup>9</sup>C.L.R. James, "The Artist in the Caribbean," in his *The Future In The Present: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby Ltd., 1977), p. 185.

<sup>10</sup>F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup>de Rooy.



Norman Ph. De Palm, producer and Felix de Rooy, director, *Ara & Gabriel*

with a Dionysian sexual personae, he is capable of psychosocial transformation: from male into female or animal. With the capacity for assuming different identities, Alma Sola's treachery is only revealed when the vigilance of Desolato's inhabitants is weakened. However, it is Alma Sola's powers of self-transformation that makes him seductive and transgressive, this being the source of his powers.

I contend that Alma Sola's display of transvestism is a Dionysian identity trope that enables him to enter the universe of female experience. To embrace female personae is to pass through the dark tunnel and into the terrain of feminine sensibilities. Here we have Alma Sola's affirmation of his radical identification with the mother. One should also note that Alma Sola also has a nomadic existence

which is related to the mother-cult, the bearer of light. Teshome Gabriel writes:

"The nomad is isolated against forces that are more powerful than he. Dejected and confused, sitting around an open fire in the evening, he gazes at the open flames and begins to hallucinate about the legendary spring. Suddenly, through the haze there appears a woman that the nomad has not seen before. The woman stands in darkness. Reaching into the fire, she grasps a handful of glowing embers from the ashes and throws them high into the heavens, their trail of light blazing "pathways to the stars." Ever since, moonbeams and starlight have guided nomads in the night."<sup>12</sup>

Desolato's spiritual guardian is the priestess/matriarch Solem, a herbalist and a spiritual mediator. Solem has had to sacrifice her fertility for the well being of Desolato. It is her transgression of this role that announces confusion and chaos in Desolato. Forbidden from having relationships with men, Solem's desire to experience the "mystery of physical love" provides Alma Sola with the opportunity to lead her into the theatre of physical ecstasy. While in search for food and herbs, Solem, accompanied by a young boy, Lucio, encounters a wounded man. Moved by a profound compassion, she hides him in a cave and nurses him, but in doing so Solem violates the rules of Desolato. Seduced by the man who later dis-

<sup>12</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel, p. 63.



appears, Solem is expelled from Desolato when her pregnancy becomes known. Her pregnancy is associated with evil forces.

Again de Rooy returns to the tropes of nomadology, racial fusion and "spiritual automation." Solem is turned into the wanderer/nomad as she, Lucio and the newborn Almacita leave in search of Matriz di Piedat, the place of dwelling spirits. Solem's journey becomes a quest for the light of the spirit world, which will cleanse her and Almacita of the ravages of evil. But with Matriz di Peitat located in the region of Alma Sola, Solem's efforts are threatened by sabotage. Her struggles with Alma Sola results in the death of Almacita, and it is Lucio who carries the body to Matriz di Piedat, where she is reborn into the world of ancestral spirits. Almacita's tragic death and rebirth becomes a kind of consolation for Solem when she finally arrives in Matriz di Piedat. Cleansed of evil forces, Solem and Lucio return to Desolato. Eros, the life force, conquers the death instincts and redemption is secured through rebirth. In some of the film's most intensely lyrical passages, the Dionysian vision is expressed in a ritual of song, dance, music, caves, and the symbolic references to red earth. Existence becomes a ritual of worship to the powers of nature.

Where *Almacita, Soul of Desolato* is an exploration of the legend, and the powers of religion and mythology, *Ava & Gabriel* deploys one central semiotic regime through which de Rooy examines artistic vision and the politics of patronage, colonized and colonizer and the psychosocial dynamics of sexuality. The narrative revolves around the ancient messiah myth and its archetypal status in Antillean culture. I differ from those who claim that *Ava & Gabriel* is a historical drama set in an exotic location. That kind of textual reading serves only to imprison the film into the madhouse of realism and historical determinacy. An alternative reading of this film would necessarily have to exist outside of the formalist excesses of realism. As a product/construction of the Creole imagination, the film's nomadic structure indicates an attempt to develop a cinema free of boundaries, a cinema in which genre is made redundant and the Apollonian temple upon which genre is built crumbles. Again, Teshome Gabriel succinctly renders this possibility:

"Nomadic cinema brings an unprecedented and unexpected jolt to cinematic reality by smashing down boundaries — between documentary, ethnographic, travelogue, experimental and nar-

rative fiction. Nomadic cinema makes both habit and virtue of this jolt."<sup>13</sup>

Cinema as an aesthetic journey free of boundaries, driven by Dionysian desires, is precisely what fascinates me, because cinema is once again reclaiming its right to invent its own mythologies. In *Ava & Gabriel* we have such a moment. But the film is also de Rooy's most intensely Fanonian interrogation and dissection of the Creole psyche and he does so through a series of interlocking narrative tropes: religion, miscegenation, homo-erotica and cultural confrontation.

The film is set in 1948 colonial Curacao and de Rooy uses the painting of a Black Madonna as a primal scene of catharsis to deconstruct the insular decadent morality of colonial settlers and hypocrisies of the church. The narrative hinges on a radical reinterpretation of Christianity's most enduring trope: the Immaculate Conception. It focuses on the myth of the Archangel Gabriel, who brings joyful tidings to the world, impregnates the Virgin Mary and then returns to the spiritual world through death.

It is de Rooy's imaginative use of this myth that permeates the film's narrative composition and embellishes his characters with complex psychological dispositions. It is very much about what happens to people when the sacred is racialized and when the Antillean artist attempts to express in his painting the grammar of Creole existence. This dilemma is most clearly expressed when the painter Goedbloed presents his sketch for the Madonna to his patrons, the ecclesiastical order of the Catholic church and the island's governor and his wife. Their reactions to the painting of a Black Madonna represents a series of splits, which is a statement as much about race as it is about the modernist movement in painting. The first reaction comes from Louise, the governor's wife:

"This really is most interesting Mr. Goedbloed. Eccentric. Those Antillean elements combined with Western technique."

But the governor's reaction is somewhat circumspect, when turning to Goedbloed he says:

"Technically not bad, but a Madonna against an Antillean background doesn't seem historically right."

From this difference of opinion the narrative unfolds from one cathartic moment to the next. It is Gabriel's (the painter) vision of a Black Madonna

<sup>13</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel p. 73.

for the Antilles that precipitates character transformation, because his vision of art with historical and racial relevance appears scandalous to this Antillean community. The emotional and spiritual chaos that this causes is two-fold. First, Gabriel is not a native of Curacao. His existence is nomadic, he is from Surinam, also in the Dutch Antilles. He is an outsider and his presence signifies disorder. Second, he chooses a local young teacher, Ava Recordina, the Creole daughter of an Antillean mother and Dutch father as his model for the painting of the Virgin Mary. This symbiotic relationship is further problematized when Ava becomes sexually involved with Gabriel. This has the effect of forcing her lover's — the white police chief Carlos Zarius — disapproval to turn into fear (psychosexual anxieties), which will later result in violence against both painter and model.

In the end the painter falls victim to the scandal that his vision has fuelled. The moment he arrives he is warned by the police chief Carlos Zarius: "We are easy going people, Mr. Goedbloed, but if necessary we can be mean motherfuckers."

In the resulting tragedy de Rooy weaves a complex machinery of Antillean characters to produce a portrait of Antillean existence that is both celebratory and transgressive. But it is the characters' Fanonian personae that remain one of the film's outstanding achievements. Initially, before her encounter with Gabriel, one imagines Ava to have an identical psychoracial existence as does the Antillean figure of Mayotte in Fanon's seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*. Mayotte asks for nothing more than a piece of whiteness in her life. Like Mayotte,

I think that Ava's situation encapsulates what Fanon meant when he wrote:

"The number of sayings, proverbs, petty rules of conduct that govern the choice of a lover in the Antilles is astounding. It is always essential to avoid falling into the pit of niggerhood, and every woman in the Antilles, whether in a casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined to select the least black of men. I know a great number of girls from Martinique...who admitted to me with complete candor that they would find it impossible to marry black men"<sup>14</sup>

Ava's encounters with Gabriel, first as model and later as lover, represent catharsis; the origins of her later personal transformation germinates in this encounter. It is a statement about the powers of art to transform conceptions of self, and personal location within the larger fabric of cultural flows. Again, in an ensuing confrontation with her mother, the smashing of her father's photograph and her battles with Carlos Zarius's family, these are instances of Ava struggling to cleanse herself of racial demons. Without having to get stuck into micro analyses of character psychology, my fundamental contention is that de Rooy's complex study of racial psychosis, sexual personae and the powers of artistic vision to provoke, scandalize and heal racial lacerations are emerging as a central feature in Antillean cinema.

Undoubtedly these questions will remain a central feature for epistemological and ontological inquiry. There is little choice in the matter, for this is the Antillean's

cultural and historical inheritance. And as the literary giants of the "internal plantation" have done, Antillean filmmakers will have to do likewise. The task is to continuously invent new ways of addressing our existential states, like Fanon has done in psychiatry and Walcott in poetry it is now the turn of filmmakers to achieve this in cinema.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London, Pluto Press, 1991), pp. 47-48. Fanon's inquiry into the psyche of the Antillean is of key importance to understanding the connections between racial psychosis and cultural identity. An understanding of this symbiosis is crucial, because it is between these two poles that splitting takes place. Fanon's significance for the cinema is as important as it is for the field of psychiatry and the black subject.



# BLOOD, VENGEANCE &



*Dances With Wolves*

## THE anxious LIBERAL Natives and Non-Natives in Recent Movies

by Deborah Root

If the past five years are any indication of public interest in the idea of Indianness, there is a seemingly endless audience for the story of the victimized "Dances with Wolves" Indian who suffers at the hand of the sadly misguided, yet completely powerful "dominant society." In this way injustice is revealed but only by underscoring the powerlessness of Indian people.<sup>1</sup>

Deborah Doxtator's remarks on *Dances with Wolves* stress one of the political consequences of commercial cinema's usage of Native histories and communities in their products. Keeping in mind the relation between images of powerlessness and continuing racism, how do we account for the popularity of films like *Dances With Wolves*? We know that white cultural institutions haven't suddenly been purged of racism; this suggests that any movie about oppressed people that engages the white public's imagination should be regarded with some suspicion. And, not surprisingly, the recent films that claim to offer a 'sympathetic' portrayal of Native people often continue to use specific tropes and narrative structures that link up to more explicit kinds of racism.

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Doxtator, *Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness* (Brantford: Woodland Cultural Centre, 1992), p.14.

Now the problems with *Dances With Wolves* are fairly obvious: the conflicts between whites and Natives over land are conveniently situated in the past; the main story is yet another love story between white people in an exotic setting; the film enforces a distinction between good and bad Indians, here Lakota and Pawnee. I think it's symptomatic that the white audience at my local theatre collectively and reflexively gasped "Oh, no" upon the first appearance of Native people in the narrative, which underscores once again how deep the white fear of Indian people goes. The critic Ward Churchill referred to the movie as *Lawrence of South Dakota*,<sup>2</sup> which pretty much encapsulates the film's status as a colonial romance.

By focusing on the past, the movie allows the non-Native audience to play out certain romantic fantasies without ever having to engage in contemporary struggles: Milton Born With A Tooth commented that, at the same time the Blackfoot Confederacy Lonefighters were fighting against a dam on their land in southern Alberta, he couldn't get in to see *Dances With Wolves* in Calgary because it was so popular with white people, presumably more or less the same ones that didn't support local Natives on the dam issue. Milton's experience points to another problem with commercial films that appropriate and utilize Native material and/or claim to address Native issues, past and present: they rarely have anything to do with any political commitment on the part of non-Natives to understand and support contemporary Native struggles.

There are reasons for this. In most of the recent commercial offerings, what the audience sees again and again are violent Natives and tortured, guilt-ridden white liberals. These movies have a didactic function whether they know it or not, although their purpose is, it is claimed, to entertain. The constant bombardment of the audience with images of Native violence and paralytic white guilt seems so ideologically suspect (assuming we can still use these words) that the entertainment motive is easy to overlook. It's not really a question of conspiracy on the part of filmmakers. Rather, filmmakers, like the rest of us, make use of convenient ready-







made images and tropes (such as 'the vanishing Indian') that function as a kind of shorthand and conveniently and quickly narrativize disparate material.

I am interested here in recent commercial films that have a reasonably wide distribution, specifically *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Clearcut*, *Isbi: The Last of His Tribe*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Thunderheart*. (There are other films, for instance, *Black Robe*, which I did not include because I could not bear the thought of sitting through a movie about Jesuits.) The tropes and images appearing in commercial films are symptomatic of current conventional views and dominant discourses, and as such can tell us something about contemporary racism. These films appear to be directed at a range of audiences: for instance, *Clearcut* had a relatively limited theatrical distribution but has done well in video, whereas *Isbi* was made for PBS, which would seem to limit the audience to those who maintain some sort of loyalty to a notion of high culture. The question of target audience can be complex. How do we interpret the presence of several copies of *Clearcut* at a video outlet in a small town in the state of Washington, with a nearby Native community and a white population of loggers and countercultural relics? Who's renting the video? The film never made it to the local movie theatre.

## Violence

The European and white North American view of Natives as dangerous and violent has a long history. The notion of non-Europeans as violent predates 1492 and is apparent in very early accounts of Arab and African people in European texts. After 1492, European accounts of Native people were sometimes initially couched in terms of Native kindness and gentleness, but any resistance to colonial encroachment tended to be discussed in terms of a supposedly inherent propensity to violence on the part of indigenous people. Because the notion of

<sup>2</sup> Ward Churchill, *Fantastes of the Master Race* (Montreal: Common Courage Press, 1992), pp. 243-248.

Native violence is so long-standing and pervasive, it is able to structure many of the images we see on screen, in part because it operates as a way of concealing or drowning out discussions of colonial violence.

This pertains to how we understand history and the way historical narratives are structured around violent events. In non-Native versions of colonial or Native history, the violence that is usually emphasized comes from Native people. With respect to film, I think it's important to pay attention to how the trope of Native violence relates to the psychological effect of seeing violent acts on a movie or TV screen. The point of violent images is to shock the viewer, and it works because the emotional charge of seeing a hideous act of violence will stay with us and overdetermine any other messages the films are trying to get across. In *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Clearcut*, two recent movies which were advertised as being pro-Indian (at least to some extent), the on-screen violent acts are all committed by Natives. In Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*, the action of the film is set against the North American war between the French and the British, but this remains in the background of the main story; although we heard cannon fire, we never saw close-up effects of violence coming from the Europeans. But Native violence is constantly presented, with scene after scene being displayed of people being hacked by tomahawks and one scene of a white man being burned alive according to what was supposed to be Iroquois tradition. (We note in passing that 'Canada' is the source of the violent, anti-white Native people in the film.) These are the images that remain in the non-Native viewer's mind, because they so ably reinforce white fears.

*The Last of the Mohicans* can be thought of as an Eastern, which is to say, a Western adventure narrative set in the east, the locale of which can draw attention away from the extent to which the events comprising the narrative conform to traditional westerns. We are presented with attacks by hostile war parties, "purty gals" who require rescuing, a cute leatherclad frontiersman, and continuous outdoor action scenes. The film marks its supposed 'sensitivity' to the Native community by hiring Native actors and acknowledging the American Indian Movement in the credits at the end of the movie (it would be very interesting to hear how that went down) and having some of the characters speak Mohawk. But the narrative shamelessly reproduces old stereotypes, which clearly demonstrates that hiring Native actors

is not enough.

The vengeance motive that underpins the action of the narrative is presented as a kind of pure violence that takes on a life of its own, as we also see in *Clearcut*. The Native characters are either completely malicious and violent, like the bad guy Magua, or they are benign and vanishing, like the good guys Chingachgook and Uncas. In this film Native violence is at once arbitrary and the result of an unreasonable thirst for vengeance, here on the part of Magua. For the average viewer, burning someone alive for reasons that are not fully clear seems unnecessarily cruel, even if he is a pompous Englishman. Yet the vengeful Magua is a more compelling character than Chingachgook and Uncas because the narrative is constructed in such a way that the film's 'good Indians' stay in the background and seem to defer to the white hero Hawkeye, played by Daniel Day Lewis. We note that in the film Hawkeye is the one that argues to an elder that Maqua is not a 'good Indian', but rather someone who through his thirst for vengeance has become white. We see in this film an old device — the white man as a mediator, presented as the one who best understands what it means to be Native.

James Fenimore Cooper's novel is quite different from the movie, and focuses on a doomed romance between a white woman and Native man. The book is an extremely racist text, permeated with the bizarre racialist theories of the nineteenth century (for instance, he believed in the natural, mutual repugnance of 'races') and the notion that progress results from wars of extermination. Whereas the movie constructs a love story between Cora and Hawkeye, a white couple, the novel's romance takes place between Cora, who is described as having a small amount of African "blood," and Uncas. Cora and Uncas of course have to die because they fall in love, suffering the typical fate of mixed couples in colonial literature. The hero Hawkeye appears as a liminal figure, a white man raised by Native men, but as for Kipling's Kim, European "blood" will tell. This is one of the main points of the story. Why make a movie out of such a novel in this day and age? It seems clear that Native themes are 'hot' these days in Hollywood, but surely there are other adventure stories that could be made into movies.

*The Last of the Mohicans* functions as a kind of counterpoint to *Dances With Wolves*, which has been accused of 'romanticizing' Native people because it depicts Lakota culture as functional and the individuals as complete characters. *The Last of the Mohicans*



warns its audience that white people should be careful about revering old-time Indians, as (according to the film) these were malicious and vengeful (unless they were deferential and/or dead). We note that the violent Natives are presented as being more or less Iroquois, which also draws upon the timeworn practice of viewing the nations comprising the Iroquois Confederacy as particularly frightening.<sup>3</sup> The message of the film seems clear: white people shouldn't think too highly of Native people or societies, despite the benevolent Chingachgook, portrayed by Russell Means.

## More Violence

The 1991 film *Clearcut*, directed by Richard Bugajski, deals with contemporary land rights issues in Canada, and is a fictional account of the aftermath of an Ontario land claim that was rejected by the courts. At the beginning of the film we very briefly see the RCMP busting heads at a blockade, but what the camera really focuses on is Arthur, the Graham Greene character, attacking people with knives, and a lengthy scene in which he debarks, or flays, a white man's leg. Over and over again this film shows scenes in which the Graham Greene character, presented as the archetypal angry Indian man, acts violently. While the racist mill owner is presented as personally unpleasant, he ultimately becomes a kind of martyr in the film, suffering what most viewers will see as the extreme cruelty of the land rights activist. Critic Marjorie Beaucage puts it succinctly when she writes: "*Clearcut* makes the audience hate Indians."<sup>4</sup>

In *Clearcut* current land issues appear totally polarized. As a result the white liberal goes crazy because he can't decide which way to jump. Peter, the liberal lawyer, goes back and forth, first agreeing with the Native man who wants to protect the earth, then with the white mill owner who wants to clearcut it: there is no consistency to his beliefs. Liberals are having a hard time these days, and seem more anxious than ever because they still can't seem to commit themselves or to take sides. This film seems to be warning white people that to think too profoundly about aboriginal rights issues can cause insanity. Because Peter was the lawyer who lost the land claims case, he is angry and, moreover, apparently feels some confusion and guilt because of his privileges (or at least he is challenged about these by a Native character in the film, who refers to his car phone in Toronto). The movie scripts the unlikely

words into an elder's mouth: "Somebody must pay," which Peter interprets as a call to vengeance.

*Clearcut* becomes a more interesting film when read, possibly against the grain, as a critique of white fantasies about Native people.<sup>5</sup> Peter, the white liberal lawyer, produces Arthur out of his own anger, guilt and frustration, and out of what he had read in books about Native violence and anger. He is full of subterranean fears about Native people, the result of a lifetime of racist propaganda, and this is demonstrated in his expectations of Arthur. Arthur, for example, eats a live spider and announces "Apache style" because the lawyer has read in books that this is what Apache people do, and at some level this frightens and horrifies Peter (which of course is the purpose of such books). The angry Arthur, then, exists as a total projection of the white man. But the film fails to make this clear. One reason this does not come across is because Graham Greene's acting blows everyone else off the screen, and his character therefore becomes much stronger than perhaps the author intended. The Arthur character also makes an impression on the audience because he fits into the lone-individual-seeks-justice plot line so beloved by Hollywood, even if in this instance the character is Native.

Although non-Native colonial violence is referred to in films such as *Mohicans* and *Clearcut*, what we actually see are Native people committing brutal acts. And perhaps more importantly, *Clearcut* offers a completely polarized version of land rights issues: there is only death and torture on the one side and rape of the land on the other. This enforces the status quo by encouraging the viewer to believe that there is no way out of the impasse, a state of affairs that makes personal responsibility appear to have nothing to do with the issue.

## Unhappy Liberals

The angst of the liberal lawyer in *Clearcut* is mirrored in the PBS docudrama *Ishi: The Last of His Tribe*, which tells the story of the famous anthropologist Alfred Kroeber's relationship with Ishi, the so-called last wild Indian of California, who lived in the anthropology museum at the university from his

<sup>3</sup> News accounts of the Oka standoff also utilized this notion of the violent and warlike Iroquois in references to Mohawk history.

<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Beaucage, "Films about Indigenous Peoples," *Fuse* magazine, Winter 1992, p.28.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Beverly Pietro and Jake Boots for developing this interpretation of the film.

capture in 1911 until his death in 1916. Ishi is played by Graham Greene.

In *Ishi*, the white liberals are guilty and miserable, rather than angry and insane, possibly because they are academics. Nevertheless, the academic and scientific discourses that underpin racism are not put into question as a whole; the white remorse exists purely at the level of the individual. This reiterates the useful lesson: liberals ultimately side with power. Kroeber's unhappiness seems to have to do both with his role as witness to his wife's slow death from consumption and to the supposedly wasting and dying cultures upon which he has based his career, and here his guilt takes on an existential quality. Kroeber is presented as a refined man (something like PBS viewers) who knows better than the average white person the value of what is being lost, yet he is nevertheless unable to act. In the story he acts too slowly to keep Ishi's body from an autopsy after his death, as he had promised.

The film, not surprisingly, tries to present the anthropologist as some kind of intermediary between white and Native rather than as one more representative of colonial power, and, accordingly, the colonial violence with which Kroeber is complicit is displaced. The point of the film seems to be that Kroeber comes to recognize Ishi as a human being rather than a specimen, and that this recognition produces guilt and remorse in the anthropologist, a construct extremely problematic. At the end of the movie Kroeber sings for Ishi in the spirit world, not that it did Ishi a whole lot of good when he was alive. Rather, in the film the function of the singing seems to be to make Kroeber, the anthropologist, feel better, and he is thus able to redeem himself and, by extension, his project. In this way the story of Ishi becomes a story of a white man coming to terms with his world-historical and personal guilt. Of course, Kroeber never feels quite guilty enough to put his own position or academic discipline into question. In fact the question never even comes up, a fact which is presumably of some comfort to the viewers of PBS.

*Ishi* was released at about the same time as *Thunderheart* and was so depressing that after watching it we all jumped in a cab to go to see *Thunderheart* for the third time. The viewer of *Ishi* is treated to lengthy scenes of the white man's horror at what he has done, as Kroeber contemplates the rows and rows of Native skeletons in his museum. This film really is unremittingly bleak; everybody is rigidly trapped in his or her role with no room to even question their position, much less move. I realize that the real-life story of Ishi is extremely sad, but the film

universalizes this sadness and makes it seem inevitable, and healing and change impossible. Hence the depression *Ishi* produces.

## Thunderheart

Michael Apted's *Thunderheart* is a more satisfying movie than the others I have discussed, despite the problems that are endemic to Hollywood-type films. The story is loosely based on, or more correctly uses as background, the FBI's pursuit and capture of Leonard Peltier, who continues to languish in a United States prison.

*Thunderheart* is unusual in that it depicts, or at least makes seem possible and comprehensible to outsiders, grassroots Native resistance to land grabbing, and it makes clear what this resistance has had to contend with. It reveals the corruption of the FBI and how this agency has greedily colluded with certain band councils. It shows the link between tradition and land politics. In short, *Thunderheart* makes explicit that colonialism in North America is a continuing process, and begins to show what is at stake today for Native communities. The FBI's war against the American Indian Movement has ultimately been part of a larger war against Native people, a war over mineral rights and control of resources.

This said, the movie is not perfect, either politically or as a film. *Thunderheart*, as Hollywood would have it, manifests an individualized notion of political activism, as the attractive leading-man type hero played by Val Kilmer slowly comes to recognize that his FBI comrades are unscrupulous and evil. Apted seemed to want to construct the narrative as a thriller, which necessitates a hero and a reasonable amount of suspense. Graham Greene's tribal cop character, although engaging, is nevertheless a policeman, and the outsider wonders about his role in the polarized community, a fictionalized Pine Ridge. The somewhat annoying final scene replicates almost exactly the final scene of *Flashback*: the ex-FBI guy, now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, prepares to embark upon an unspecified new life. The film just barely manages to leave open the possibility of a rehabilitated FBI, no doubt to reassure its more conservative viewers.

However, *Thunderheart* at least makes an effort to focus on the background to events as well as the hero's personal story (unlike *Clearcut*), and tries to handle the spiritual issues with respect, showing these as part of life rather than as something exotic



and strange. Naturally, the popularity of this film is due in large part to the scene near the end where the AIM guys are waiting to rescue the heroes, and completely outnumber the FBI (for a change). Too bad it didn't happen in real life, although the viewer could almost believe it for a minute. And perhaps it is the film's commercial package that permitted this scene to be seen so widely.

### Some Effects

I think *Dances With Wolves* tries to show that for white people there were alternatives to the role of genocidal soldier, even though a possibility of refusing complicity with the colonial project was totally individualized in the storyline. As a white viewer, I was struck by the way it managed to show that racism means that it's not enough to simply be a white man; rather, you have to act like a white man or you can lose your privileges and be considered and treated as a traitor. This is not a question of insisting that there were some nice white people, which becomes a way of not talking about colonial and/or racist violence, but of locating margins in the past and present, that show people that there are choices right now. But did this potential lesson take? I think of the sold-out cinemas in Calgary, and the fight against the dam. Ultimately, *Dances With Wolves* fails as an anti-racist movie.

In these films, with the exception of *Thunderheart*, the portrayal of Native people seems to run along old, old lines, in effect focusing simultaneously on Natives as violent and as passive victims of colonial aggression. The portrayal of white people, on the other hand, seems to manifest a new discourse, which presents the character as ignorant and destructive but meaning well (as in *Ishtar*). This, of course, replays the "we didn't know what was going on" defence heard elsewhere. Such movies continue to elide present day racisms and complications and make healing difficult, if not impossible.

**SUBSCRIBE TO  
CANADA'S MAGAZINE  
OF CULTURAL STUDIES.**



**ONE FREE ISSUE WITH EVERY  
NEW SUBSCRIPTION**

**Special Issues on:** 'Race', First Nations, Queer Culture, Latin America as well as regular coverage of ongoing themes in popular culture, film, art, music, the landscape and more. Also, an extensive book review section and the new **Rampike Literary Supplement** (2X per year).

Published Quarterly

☐

\$20 Individuals

☐

\$16 Low Income

☐

\$35 Institutions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**Outside of Canada please add \$10.00**

Send payment To: **Border/Lines Magazine**  
183 Bathurst Street Suite No. 301  
Toronto M5T 2R7  
Phone: 416-360-5249

**BORDER/LINES**

# LONG TIME COMIN'

Directed by **Dionne Brand**  
Produced by **Nicole Hubert**

A film about two African-Canadian women artists looks at their work, their politics, their lesbian sexuality, their insistence that their art sustain a relevant political edge. Painter Grace Channer's large sensuous canvasses and musician Faith Nolan's gritty and joyous blues propel this film into the spheres of poetry and dance.

STUDIO  
D

# RETURN HOME

Directed by **Michelle Wong**  
Produced by **Margaret Wong** for Studio D  
and **Michelle Wong** for Fortune Films

A CO-PRODUCTION WITH FORTUNE FILMS  
CHINESE SUBTITLED VERSION ALSO AVAILABLE

First-generation Chinese-Canadian filmmaker **Michelle Wong** faces a struggle with cultural identity. Returning to her home in Alberta to spend time with her aging grandparents, **Michelle** uncovers a world of traditional Chinese values and beliefs that help her to understand and to accept her Chinese heritage.

STUDIO  
D



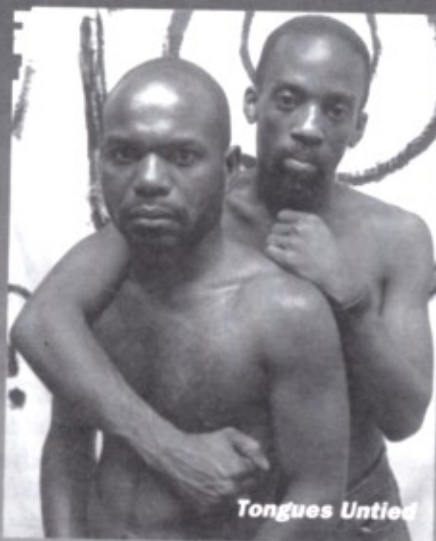
## Coming this Fall

LOOK FOR **HANDS OF HISTORY** SCHEDULED TO BE RELEASED SPRING 94



# DARK

and lovely too:



*Tongues Untied*

## Black Gay Men In Independent Film

by Kobena Mercer

We are in the midst of a wildly creative upsurge in black queer cultural politics. Through political activism and new forms of cultural practice, we have created a community that has inspired a new sense of collective identity among lesbians and gay men across the black diaspora.

The recent work in film and video by Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs emerges from and contributes to the



*Looking For Langston*

movement and direction of these new developments. I will begin by framing Riggs's *Tongues Untied* and Julien's *Looking For Langston* in the specific context of black lesbian and gay cultural politics, in order to open up a discussion on questions of difference and identity in the general context of contemporary struggles around race, gender, and sexuality. In this sense, what is important about black lesbian and

gay cultural politics is not simply that we have created a new sense of community among ourselves — although the importance of that cannot be emphasized enough — but that our struggles make it possible to arrive at a new perspective on political identity and imagined community at large.

To invoke a couple of well-worn metaphors, we have been involved in a process of “making ourselves visible” and “finding a voice.” Through activism and political organization, from large-scale international conferences to small-scale consciousness-raising groups, black lesbians and gay men have come out of the margins into the centre of political visibility. One need only point to the numerous service organizations created in response to the AIDS crisis — or more specifically the crisis of indifference and neglect in the official public health policies of countries such as Britain and the United States — to recognize that our lives are at the centre of contemporary politics. Such activity has created a base for collective empowerment. If I think about my own involvement in a small collective of gay men of African, Asian, and Caribbean descent which formed in London in the early eighties, what was so empowering was precisely the feeling of belonging which arose out of the transformation from “I” to “we.”

It was through the process of coming together — communifying as it were, that we transformed experiences previously lived as individual, privatized, and even pathologized problems into the basis for a sense of collective agency. This sense of agency enabled us to formulate an agenda around our experiences of racism in the white gay community and issues of homophobia in black communities. I think I can generalize here to the extent that the agenda of black lesbian and gay struggles over the past decade has been shaped and defined by this duality, by the necessity of working on at least two fronts at all times, and by the difficulty of constantly negotiating our relationship to the different communities to which we equally belonged.

For this reason, rather than conceptualize our politics in terms of “double” or “triple” oppression, it should be seen as a hybridized form of political and cultural practice. By this I mean that precisely because of our lived experiences of discrimination in and exclusion from the white gay and lesbian community, and of discrimination in and exclusions from the black community, we locate ourselves in the spaces *between* different communities — at the intersections of power relations determined by race, class, gender, and sexuality. What follows from this

is a recognition of the interdependence of different political communities, not completely closed off from each other or each hermetically sealed like a segregated bantustan but interlocking in contradictory relations over which we struggle. If you agree with this view, then it has important implications for the way we conceptualize the politics of identity.

We habitually think of identity in mutually exclusive terms, based on the either/or logic of binary oppositions. As black lesbians and gay men we are often asked, and sometimes ask ourselves: Which is more important to my identity, my blackness or my sexuality? Once the question of identity is reduced to this either/or dichotomy, we can see how ridiculous and unhelpful it is; as black lesbians and gay men we cannot separate the different aspects of our identities precisely because we value both our blackness and our homosexuality. It is this contrast between both/and against either/or that is at stake in the problem of “identity politics” — in the pejorative sense of the term.

We are all familiar with the right-on rhetoric of “race, class, and gender,” so often repeated like a mantra to signify one’s acknowledgment of the diversity of social identities at play in contemporary politics. What is wrong with the “race, class, gender” mantra is that it encourages the reductive notion that there is a hierarchy of oppressions and thus a hierarchy of “doubly” or “triply” oppressed identities. What often occurs when different communities try to come together is a tendency to use our differences as a means of competition and closure in order to assert who is more oppressed than whom. In this way, difference becomes the basis of divisiveness, encouraging group closure in the competition for resources, rather than the recognition of the interdependence of our various communities. This is because identity is assumed to be an essential category, fixed once and for all by the community to which one belongs — a view which ignores the fact that we very rarely ever belong exclusively to one homogenous and monolithic community and that, for most of us, everyday life is a matter of passing through, travelling between, and negotiating a plurality of different spaces. Black lesbians and gay men are not exempt from the worst aspects of such categorical identity politics. But precisely because of our hybrid legacy, drawing on the best aspects of our dual inheritance from both black struggles and lesbian and gay struggles of the sixties and seventies, we might arrive at a better appreciation of the politics of identity which begins with the recognition of difference and diversity.



Let me put it like this: the literary work of writers such as Audre Lorde, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Cheryl Clarke, and Assoto Saint — to name only a few — has been absolutely essential to the process of finding a voice and creating community. Through their stories we have transformed ourselves from objects of oppression into subjects and agents busy making history in our own right. Such narratives have been indispensable to the formation of our identity. As Stuart Hall has put it, "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."<sup>1</sup> But what we find in their work is not the expression of one singular, uniform, homogenous, black lesbian or gay male identity that is at all times identical to itself. Rather we find stories that narrate our differences and the multiplicity of experiences lived by black lesbians and gay men. We find that black lesbians and gay men do not all speak in one voice. To me, this suggests the recognition of the possibility of unity-in-diversity, and implies a skeptical disposition towards categorical identity politics. Such work suggests that we give up the search for a purified ideal type or positive role model of political correctness, because it teaches us to value our own multiple differences as the very stuff of which our queer diasporic identities are made.

Insofar as these issues inform the interventions that Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs have made in independent films, it is important to situate their work in relation to the question of identity. Namely, that identities are not found in nature but historically constructed in culture — or to put it another way, *identity is not what you are so much as what you do*. Black queer cultural politics has not expressed an essential identity that was always already there waiting to be discovered, but has actively invented a multitude of identities through a variety of activities and practices, whether organizing workshops and fund-raising parties, lobbying and mobilizing around official policies, writing poems, publishing magazines, taking photographs, or making films.

### Finding a Voice: Independent Cinema and Black Representation

*Tongues Untied* and *Looking for Langston* share a number of similarities: both are the "first" black independent productions to openly address black homosexuality, because prior to now such issues have been avoided or omitted from black indepen-

dent cinema; both tell our stories of the experience of dual exclusion, being silenced and being hidden from history. And, taking all this into account, both have won similarly enthusiastic responses from various audiences around the world, and have received numerous awards and prizes.

At the same time, these two works could not be more different in style and approach. Whereas *Tongues Untied* foregrounds autobiographical voices that speak from the lived experiences of black gay men in the here and now, and emphasizes the immediacy, direct address, and in-your-face realism associated with video, *Langston* speaks to black gay experience by tracking the enigmatic sexual identity of one of the most cherished icons of black cultural history, Langston Hughes, whose presence is evoked through music, poetry, and archival film to create a dreamlike space of poetic reverie, historically framed by images of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. To put it crudely, the contrast in aesthetic strategies turns on the difference between a video which embodies the values of documentary realism and a film which self-consciously places itself in the art cinema tradition.

Rather than play one off against the other, I want to use these differences to underline my point about the plurality and diversity of identities among black gay men. From this perspective we can recognize the way in which both Julien and Riggs participate in a similar cultural and political project that concerns the struggle to find a voice in the language of cinema, which, up to now, has treated the black gay subject as merely an absence, or present only as an object of someone else's imagination. In this sense, Julien and Riggs deepen and extend the critical project of black independent cinema: to find a place from which to speak as a black subject in a discourse which has either erased and omitted the black subject or represented the black subject only through the mechanism of the stereotype, fixed and frozen as an object of someone else's fears and fantasies. However, between them, the two works also challenge and disrupt certain assumptions within black independent cinema itself, and in this way their strategies bring to light an important paradox about race and representation which parallels the problem of identity in political discourse.

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework*, no. 36 (1989) pp. 68-81; reprinted in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) p. 225.

Both Julien and Riggs are independent practitioners, which is to say that the conditions of production in which they work are distinct from the conditions that obtain in the commercial film industry, in which production, distribution, and exhibition are monopolized by private corporations, mostly centred in Hollywood. Yet, as James Snead has pointed out, the term independent is something of a misnomer, since such practitioners are highly dependent on the role of public sector institutions, not only in the funding of production, but in terms of the subsequent distribution and exhibition of films regarded as "noncommercial."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, public funding is a key condition enabling both works. *Tongues Untied* was financed by a range of grants from various foundations and institutions, including a Western States Regional Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and *Langston* was funded principally by the British Film Institute and Channel Four Television, both of which have an official mandate and responsibility to support work from and about social constituencies underrepresented in film and television.

Although such public sector institutions have shaped, influenced, and sometimes curtailed the renewal of black independent film in the 1980s, there are salient national differences in the conditions of independent practice. Whereas Julien's film is a Sankofa production and emerges from a context in which collective methods have flourished in the British workshop sector, which includes Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo, Retake, and other groups, mostly in London,<sup>3</sup> Riggs directs his own independent production company, based in Oakland and works on an individual basis, as do most black practitioners in the United States — from Julie Dash and Haile Gerima to Charles Burnett and Michelle Parkerson — where the independent sector is more dispersed.

It is significant, however, that, at the point of exhibition, both *Tongues* and *Langston* have been shown twice on public television, on PBS in the United States and on Channel Four in Britain. This is significant, not simply in making the works accessible to a broader range of audiences, but in terms of the responsibility of public television — as opposed to commercial cinema — to represent the underrepresented. This can be seen as the locus of a particular problem in the politics of representation that all minority practitioners encounter, namely, that representation does not simply denote a practice of depiction but also has the connotation of a practice

of delegation, in which the minority practitioner is often positioned in the role of a representative who speaks for the entire constituency from which he or she comes. Elsewhere, I have discussed this problematic as the "burden of representation" which black artists and filmmakers have had to negotiate once they gain access to the apparatus of representation.<sup>4</sup>

In a situation where the right to representation is rationed and regulated, so that minorities experience restricted access to the means of representation, there is often an assumption on the part of funding institutions and an expectation on the part of audiences that they should "speak for" their particular communities. This is felt and lived as a real dilemma for artists and practitioners themselves, as Martina Artille, formerly of the Sankofa Collective, put it in relation to the making of *The Passion of Remembrance* in 1986:

There was this sense of urgency to say it all, or at least to signal as much as we could in one film. Sometimes we can't afford to hold anything back for another time, another conversation or another film. That is the reality of our experience — sometimes we only get the one chance to make our selves heard.<sup>5</sup>

What has emerged in the "new wave" of black independent film during the eighties, particularly in the British context, is the awareness of the impossibility of carrying this burden without being crushed by it. It is impossible for any one individual to speak as a representative for an entire community without risking the violent reductionism which repeats the

<sup>2</sup> James Snead, "Black Independent Film: Britain and America," in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film British Cinema*, ICA Document 7, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988) p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Sankofa Film and Video Collective comprises Isaac Julien, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh Edwards, and Robert Cruz. It was formed in 1984 in London with the aims of developing an independent black film culture in the areas of production, exhibition, and audience discussions. Under the aegis of the ACTT Workshop Declaration, the Collective has been funded from a variety of sources, including the Greater London Council, the British Film Institute and Channel Four. For background information on their work, and that of the Black Audio Film Collective, see interviews in Coco Fusco, ed., *Young, British and Black*, (Buffalo: Contemporary Hallwalls Arts Center, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "De Margin and De Centre," introduction to *Screen* vol. 29 no. 4 (Autumn, 1988) pp. 2-10, and Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text*, no. 10 (Spring 1990) pp. 61-78.

<sup>5</sup> Martina Artille in Jim Pines, "The Passion of Remembrance: Background and Interview with Sankofa," *Framework*, no. 32/33 (1986) p. 101.





**Looking For Langston**

stereotypical view within the majority culture that minority communities are homogeneous, unitary, and monolithic because their members are all the same. It is impossible for any one black person to claim the right to speak for the diversity of identities and experiences within black society without the risk that such diversity will be sim-

plified and reduced to what is seen as typical, a process which thereby reproduces and replicates the logic of the racist stereotype that all black people are, essentially, the same.

Julien and Riggs both recognize these pitfalls in racial representation, and what is remarkable is that through entirely different



**Looking For Langston**

aesthetic strategies they enact a film practice which refuses to carry the burden of representation, instead opening it up to displace the assumptions and expectations contained within it. To examine how they do this I want to focus first on the articulation of multiple voices in *Tongues Untied* and then turn to the gaze and looking relations as articulated in *Looking For Langston*.

### Dialogic Voicing in Documentary Realism

One of the adjectives most frequently invoked in response to *Tongues Untied*, especially among black gay men, is "real": we value the film for its "realness." A cursory historical overview of black independent cinema would reveal the prevalence of a certain realist aesthetic, which must be understood as one of the privileged modes through which black filmmakers have sought to contest those versions of reality inscribed in the racist discourses of the dominant film culture. As a counterdiscourse, the imperative of such a realist aesthetic in black film, whether documentary or drama, is to "tell it like it is." What is at issue in the oppositional or critical role of black independent cinema is the ability to articulate a counterdiscourse based on an alternative version of reality inscribed in the voices and viewpoints of black social actors.

*Tongues* is congruent with the tradition of documentary realism in black film culture, as it foregrounds a range of autobiographical voices that dramatize the power of witness and testimony. Through the authority of their own experiences, black gay men come to voice as primary definers of reality. As Riggs has said in a recent interview:

We live in a society in which truth is often defined by your reflection on the screen...But you don't really live and you're not really somebody until you're somehow reflected there on the tube or in the theatre...What films like *Tongues Untied* do, especially for people who have had no images of themselves out there to see, is give them a visible and visual representation of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the "realness" of the work concerns the desires and expectations of a black gay audience who decode it. But in terms of the aesthetic strategy in which it is encoded, such "realness" is an effect of the consistent use of direct address, whereby in place of the anonymous, impersonal, third-person narrator which tends to characterize the documentary genre

individuals tell their stories directly to the camera, creating the space for an interpersonal dialogue that is simultaneously confessional, affirmative, and confrontational. Its "realness" consists not simply of the accuracy or veracity of its depiction of the experiences of African American gay men — through poetry, rap, drama, dance, and music — but through this dialogic mode of address which brings the spectator into a direct relationship with the stories and experiences that find their voices.

Of the four cinematic values associated with documentary realism — transparency, immediacy, authority, and authenticity — *Tongues* seems to emphasize the latter through Riggs' presence, as he tells his life story, which serves as a thread connecting the multiple components of the video: from the poems performed by Essex Hemphill, Steve Langley, and Allan Miller, and the scenes in which the homophobic voices of a black preacher, an activist, and various black entertainers conspire to silence, ridicule, and intimidate, to the eroticism of a tender embrace between two lovers, and scenes showing rallies and Gay Pride marches. The emphasis on authenticity, honesty, and truth-to-experience through personal disclosure is underlined by Riggs' visual presence at the beginning, where he appears nude: a gesture of exposure not only suggesting the vulnerability of revealing one's own life through one's story but also establishing the framework of personal disclosure that guides the work as a whole.

It is precisely the achievement of *Tongues Untied* that its realism foregrounds such authenticity without recourse to the master codes of the documentary genre, in which the function of the impersonal voice-of-God narrator seeks to resolve all questions raised, tie up all loose ends, and explain everything as the narrative inexorably moves towards the movement of closure. *Tongues* displaces this function entirely: there is no unifying voice-over, nor indeed any single voice privileged in a position of mastery, explanation, or resolution. In terms of his own presence, Riggs does not speak as a representative whose individual story is supposed to speak for every black gay man; rather, he speaks as one voice among others, each of which articulates different experiences and identities. He does not seek to typify some unitary and homogeneous essence called "the black, gay, male experience" by presenting his story as the only story or the whole story; rather, he speaks from the specificity of his own experience, which, because of the presence of other voices and stories, is not generalized or typified as such.



This kind of dialogic voicing assumes crucial importance for a number of reasons. First, by contrast, it highlights the degree to which black independent cinema has often inadvertently replicated the problem of documentary realism, in order to authorize its own counternarratives. Furthermore, because he does not privilege any one voice as the source of authority, Riggs highlights the degree to which those voices in black cinema that claim implicitly to be representative, and to speak for the entire black race, very often tend to be only the voices of black men, whose heroic and heterosexual accents often exclude the voices of black women and black gay men. In this sense, *Tongues Untied* can be said to challenge the heterosexist presumption that so often characterizes the documentary realist aesthetic in black cinema.

To contextualize this issue, one might point to the dual role of Spike Lee as director and narrative character in *Do The Right Thing*, where he is positioned, along with the other main young black male protagonists, as the embodiment of the Bedford-Stuyvesant community itself, pitched into antagonisms with white society across the battle lines of race and ethnicity. By making the implicit claim to speak for the condition of young black men in the urban US (in terms of both the narrative structure and the marketing of the film), Lee seems to replicate the all-too-familiar stereotype of the "angry black man" consumed with rage about the politics of race and racism on the streets, to the exclusion of any other politics, such as his sexual politics between the sheets.

The second reason why the dialogic voicing of *Tongues* is important has to do with its awareness of the multidimensional character of the political. In this sense its "realness" has to do with the acknowledgement that real life is contradictory — "home is a place of truth, not peace," as Riggs comments at one point. In the autobiographical sequence, as he narrates his first kiss and being bussed to a nearly all-white school in the South, Riggs' narrative presence is framed by the concatenation of abusive epithets — "punk," "motherfuckin' coon," "homo," "nigger go home" — spat out at rhythmic intervals that underline the interplay of racism and homophobia, experienced at one and the same time. It is this awareness of a dialectic in the politics of race and sexuality that is maintained throughout the work by virtue of its dialogic strategy. *Tongues* does not seek to reduce, simplify, or resolve the lived experiences of real antagonisms but is constantly vigilant to the

complex effects of contradiction — particularly as these enter into the interior space of our own relations with each other, our intimacy, and our aversion.

If the work refuses facile notions of "internalized oppression," it equally rejects the reductive tendency of the current discourse of endangered species in which black men are seen as victims and nothing but victims. Such questions concerning the contradictions through which black masculinity is lived are forcefully raised, but rather than provide the false security of easy answers, the strategy of direct address brings the viewer and audience into the dialogue as active participants who share an equal responsibility in the search for answers. By invoking a certain answerability on the part of the audience, what the film gives is not a neat resolution to the contradictions of the real, but a range of questions for the audience to take home.

If all this sounds terribly earnest, I should emphasize that the irreverent humour of *Tongues Untied* is absolutely crucial to the subversive force of its dialogic strategy. More to the point, the element of playfulness and parody, like the aesthetics of dialogic voicing, is thoroughly embedded in the oral tradition of African American cultural expression. As the Lavender Light quartet pleads in the tape, "Hey, boy, can you come out tonight?" *Tongues* shows that its tongue is firmly in cheek in this appropriation of black pop acappella from the doo-wop tradition of the fifties. Like the freaky-deke ritual on the killing floor of the dance halls of the thirties, the Oaktown ensemble engaged in the electric slide and the beautifully stylized boys caught voguing in New York City underline the affirmative role of black expressive culture — and the contributions black gays have made to the renewal of its expressive edge. As elements of black queer subcultural ritual, such dance forms enact a performative body politics, in which the black body is a site both of misery, oppression, and exploitation, as well as of resistance, transcendence and ecstasy.

Moreover, considering the dialectic of appropriation as a constitutive feature of diasporan culture — in the case of voguing, for instance, how black gays appropriate the poses of white female models in glossy fashion magazines to create a stylized dance

<sup>6</sup> Marlon Riggs in Ron Simmons, "Tongues Untied: An Interview with Marlon Riggs," *Black Film Review*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1989); reprinted in Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson, 1991) p. 191.

form, are then in turn appropriated by white performers such as Malcolm McLaren and Madonna — *Tongues Untied* performs a doubly critical role in its affirmation of black gay pleasures. On the one hand, by reinserting black gay subcultural style into the expressive context of the African American cultural tradition as a whole, it refutes the premise that gayness is a "white thing." On the other, by recontextualizing such styles in the lived experience of black gay men, it brings to light the extent to which our pleasures may be misappropriated by white audiences, who are nevertheless fascinated and perhaps even, in some sense, envious of them. Let's face it, who wouldn't want to be a member of the Institute of Snap!thology? "Don't mess with a snap diva!" If you want the politically correct party line, please stay at home and dial 1-900-Race-Class-Gender instead.

#### Looking Relations: Allegories of Identity and Desire

In turning to Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, I want to develop the theme of appropriation as a figure of diaspora culture. This is important, not simply because of the stylish way in which the film appropriates art cinema conventions, but more fundamentally because it is impossible to understand the formation of black British identities, gay or otherwise, without a recognition of the way in which different signs have been appropriated and rearticulated to construct new forms of political identity and imagined community in this specific context.

Here I would emphasize "imagined" in Benedict Anderson's term "imagined community" because without the notion of a collective historical imagination, how could we understand why a black British filmmaker whose parents migrated to London from St. Lucia would chose to make a film about a black American writer from Kansas City.

If one thinks about the naming of the black subject in postwar Britain, it becomes necessary to reiterate the theoretical view that subjectivity is indeed socially constructed in language. What we see are not simply different names used to designate the same community but the historical becoming of such a political community in and through a struggle over the signifiers of racial discourse. The displacement of the proper name— from "coloured immigrant" in the 1950s, to "ethnic minorities" in the sixties, and to "black communities" in the seventies and eighties — vividly underlines the point that social identities are not just there in nature but are

actively constructed in culture. Of course, this did not just happen in the realm of language alone, since a whole range of nondiscursive practices have constituted Black Britain as a domain of social and political antagonism. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the material effects of symbolic and imaginary relations.

For over four hundred years in Western culture, the sign /black/ had nothing but negative connotations, to say the least. However, we have also seen that the signifying chain in which it was equated with negative values was not totally closed or fixed. In the US context during the 1960s, the term /black/ was disarticulated out of the negative chain of equivalence in racist discourse, and rearticulated into an alternative chain of equivalences as a sign of empowerment, indicated by the shift from Negro to Black. In Britain during the 1980s something similar happened, inspired and influenced by the black American example, as blackness was disarticulated out of one discursive system and rearticulated into another, where it became a sign of solidarity among Asian, African, and Caribbean peoples, and functioned as a term of a politically chosen identity rather than a genetically ascribed one. The cultural politics of the black diaspora thus highlights a deconstructive process in which the central signifiers of racist ideology, based on the binary opposition of white/non-white, were rearticulated to produce a new set of connotations in one and the same sign.

It is an awareness of the multi-accentual character of the sign that informs the critical project of black British workshops, such as Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective. And this awareness is not merely the result of an engagement with difficult poststructuralist theories, but something achieved through a practice of trial and error and open-ended experimentation inscribed in their productions, such as *Territories* (1984) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986). *Looking for Langston* continues the critique of racial representations signalled by those earlier works, but deepens and complicates it by extending it into the domain of fantasy. I would argue that the film is not a documentary search for the "truth" about Langston Hughes's ambiguous sexual identity so much as an investigation into the psychic reality of fantasy as that domain of subjectivity in which our desires and identifications are shaped. The film is as much a meditation on the psychic reality of the political unconscious — which concerns the imaginary and symbolic conduits of the diaspora, through which black Britons have sought to symbolize our





**Tongues Untied**

political dreams and desires in part through identifications with black America and black Americans — as it is a poetic meditation on the psychic and social relations that circumscribe our lives as black gay men.

This double reading is suggested by the ambiguous sense of time and place evoked by the montage of music, poetry, and archival imagery across the film's monochrome texture and stylized art direction. Characters inhabit the fictional milieu of a twenties speakeasy, where tuxedoed couples dance and drink champagne, celebrating hedonistic pleasure in defiance of the hostile world outside. It is this outside that intrudes at the end of the film when thugs and police raid the club only to find that its denizens have disappeared, while eighties house music plays on the soundtrack almost like a music video. The multilayered texture evoked by the ambiguity of past and present, outside and inside, fact and fantasy thus allows more than one reading about what the film is looking for. I want to focus on only two possibilities: an archeology of black modernism and an allegory of black gay male desire.

Langston Hughes is remembered as the key poet of the Harlem Renaissance and has come to be revered as a father figure of black literature, yet in

the process of becoming such an icon, the complexity of his life and the complexity of the Harlem Renaissance itself has been subject to selective erasure and repression by the gatekeepers and custodian's of "the colored museum." Hughes is remembered as a populist, public figure, but the enigma of his private life — his sexuality — is seen as something better left unaddressed in most biographies, an implicit gesture of denial which buries and represses the fact that the Harlem Renaissance was as gay as it was black, and that many of its key figures — Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent — were known to be queer, one way or another. *Looking for Langston* engages with and enters into this area of enigma and ambiguity, not in order to arrive at an unequivocal answer embodied in factual evidence, but to explore the ways in which various facets of black cultural life are subject to psychic and social repression, from within as well as without.

As an archeological inquiry, the film excavates what has been hidden from history, not only the fluidity of sexual identities within the black cultural

<sup>2</sup>See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

expression of that period, but the intertwining of black culture and Euro-American modernism. Just as official histories of modernism tend to erase and selectively repress the work of black artists, official versions of the Harlem Renaissance narrative tend to avoid the sexual politics of the "jazz era." Yet the film suggests that it was precisely the imbrication of race and sexuality that underpinned the expressive and aesthetic values of the cultural practices of the time — from Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* to Josephine Baker, for instance. But *Looking for Langston* is not a history lesson: the point of archeology is not to research history for its own sake but to search for answers to contemporary dilemmas, in this case the need to historicize the hybrid domain of black British cultural production in the eighties and nineties.

The film looks for Langston, but what we find is Isaac. Not so much in an autobiographical sense, but in terms of a self-reflexive awareness of the multiple influences that inform his artistic choices and methods. The desire to unravel the hidden histories of the Harlem Renaissance serves as an emblem for an inventory of the diverse textual resources which have informed the renaissance and renewal of black artistic and cultural practices in contemporary Britain. From this perspective, one might describe the film as a visual equivalent of a dialogue with the different cultural traditions from which Isaac Julien has invented his own artistic identity as a black gay auteur.

This view is suggested by the promiscuous intertextuality which the film sets in motion. Alongside visual quotations from Jean Cocteau, Kenneth Anger, and Jean Genet, the voices of James Baldwin, Bruce Nugent, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka combine to emphasize the dialogic and hybridized character of the text. In this "stereophonic space," in Barthes' phrase, Julien acknowledges the importance of the Euro-American avant garde as much as the importance of black American literature as textual resources which black British artists have used in the process of finding their own voices. It is significant, therefore, that the film articulates theory and practice not in terms of didactic prescription but in terms of enacting a translation of cultural studies into cultural politics. This reflexive enactment of cultural theory is implicit in the role played by Stuart Hall in the film, who performs the voice-over narration, as his presence suggests that the intellectual practice associated with British cultural studies now informs Julien's filmic practice as a black gay

auteur.

There is another aspect to this intertextuality that concerns what the film is looking for in the more literal sense. Its languid, dreamlike texture seduces the eye and its avowed homoeroticism solicits the gaze. Issues of voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilic obsession arise across its sensual depiction of beautiful black male bodies. But the film does not simply indulge the pleasure in looking; it radically problematizes such pleasure by questioning the racial positions of the subject/object dichotomy associated with the dialectic of seeing and being seen.

Here the key motif is the direct look, whereby the black subject looks back (whether as auteur or character) and thus turns around the question of who has the right to look in order to ask the audience who or what *they* are looking for. This motif appeared in Julien's first film made with the Sankofa Collective, *Territories*, in the context of a confrontational, and somewhat didactic, inquiry into the objectification and fetishization of black culture as framed by the white gaze. In *Langston*, however, by virtue of the seductive and invitational direction of the textual strategy, he achieves more penetrating insight into the structures of racial and sexual fantasy, precisely by setting a trap for the gaze and by the provocative incitement of our wish to look.

It is significant that the ghost of Robert Mapplethorpe is present in this staging of the look. This occurs not so much in the scene in which a white male character leisurely leafs through *The Black Book* — while Essex Hemphill reads one of his poems pinpointing the reinscription of racism in white gay culture — but in terms of a set of aesthetic conventions, such as fragmentation and chiaroscuro lighting, which the film employs to punctuate its incitement of our pleasure in looking. In this way, Julien's strategy of promiscuous intertextuality appropriates a range of visual tropes associated with white artists like Mapplethorpe to lay bare the way in which race determines the flow of power relations through the gaze in complex and ambivalent ways.

Hence, in one key scene an exchange of looks takes place between the actor who may be interpreted as "Langston" (Ben Ellison) and his mythic object of desire, a black man named "Beauty" (Matthew Biadon). This provokes a hostile competitive glance from Beauty's white male partner (John Wilson), who makes a grand gesture of drinking more champagne. As he turns away to face the bar, Langston drifts into a daydream. In this sequence, Bruce



Nugent's poem "Lillies and Jade" is read, over images that portray the Langston character searching for his lost object of desire in a field of poppies. At the end of his reverie, Langston imagines himself coupled with Beauty, their bodies entwined on a bed as if they have just made love. It is important to recognize that this coupling takes place in fantasy, because it underlines the loss of access to the object of desire as being the very source of fantasy itself. Moreover, it shows how race enters into the vocabulary of desire: as the object of both the black and the white man's gaze, Beauty acts as the signifier of desire as his desirability is enhanced precisely by the eroticized rivalry between their two looks.

It is here that the trope of visual fetishism found in Mapplethorpe's photographs makes a striking and subversive return, in close-up sequences set in the nightclub, intercut with Langston's daydream. From Langston's point of view, the camera lovingly lingers on the sensuous mouth of the actor portraying Beauty, with the rest of his face cast in shadow, like an iris shot in the silent movies. But, as in Mapplethorpe's images, the strong emphasis on chiaroscuro lighting invests the fetishized fragment or body part with a compelling erotogenic residue. The "thick lips" of the Negro are hypervalorized as the iconic emblem of Beauty's impossible desirability. In other words, Julien takes the risk of replicating the racial stereotype of the thick-lipped Negro precisely to reposition the black subject as the desiring subject, not the alienated object of the look. Like the image of the two men entwined on the bed, which recalls the homoerotic photographs of George Platt Lynes, yet also critiques them, it is only by intervening in and against the logic of fetishization in racial representation that Julien is able to open up the ambivalence of the psychic and social relations — of identification, object-choice, envy, and exclusion — inscribed in the brief relay of looks between the three men. Of each of these, I would draw attention to envy — wanting the object possessed by the Other — not only because it informs the kind of scopophilic obsession that Mapplethorpe works upon, suggesting that the white subject sees blackness as an enviable quality, but because as Julien recodes it, turning the fetish inside out, he points to the way that intraracial relations among black men themselves also entail feelings of rivalry and envy at the very basis of our identifications with each other.

I have focussed on this particular moment because it strikes me that there are important formal similarities between Julien's strategy of working in

and against the logic of racial fetishism and that of Nigerian-British gay photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, whose work is also inflected by a dialogic engagement with problems raised in Mapplethorpe. In contrast to the isolation effect in Mapplethorpe's work, whereby only one black male nude appears in the field of vision — a device that encourages a fantasy of mastery — in Kayode's work, such as *Technique of Ecstasy*, black men's bodies are coupled and contextualized to evoke an eroticism that seems to slip out of the implied power relations associated with the interracial subject/object dichotomy. Kayode creates an Afrocentric homoerotic precisely and perversely by appropriating conventions associated with the Eurocentric history of the fine art nude.

What Julien and Kayode share in common is not so much the fact that they are both black gay male artists, but that as artists they use an intertextual strategy of appropriation and rearticulation in order to signify upon, and thus critique, the dominant regime of racial and sexual representation but without negating, denying, or disavowing the reality of the fantasies that give rise to such representations. Rather, by virtue of working in and against the master codes that regulate and govern the stereotypical, they begin to unravel what takes place at the borderlines between the psychic and the social, between fantasy and history.

In this brief discussion of *Looking for Langston* I have emphasized the formal dimension of its aesthetic strategy in order to draw attention to its enunciation of an allegory of desire, which is the source of its emotional resonance, not just for black gay men but for others in the audience as well. Although it is not the only available theory of desire, psychoanalysis suggests that desire is always about loss: our search for pleasure, the search for a significant other, is about the attempt to recover a state of fusion, wholeness, or nonseparation, which can never fully be retrieved. In so far as this lost object of desire can never really be found, the search for pleasure inevitably entails frustration, privation, and despair.

The achievement of *Looking for Langston* lies precisely in the way it shows how desire and despair run together, and thus how desire always entails rituals of mourning for what is lost and cannot be recovered. There is a sense of mourning, not just for Langston, buried in the past under the repressive weight of homophobic and ethnocentric narratives, but mourning for friends, lovers, and others lost to AIDS here and now, in the present. There is mourn-

ing, but not melancholia: as Langston himself says at the end of the film, "Why should I be blue? I've been blue all night through." Just like the multiple allusions of the term "blue," the textual strategy of the film as a whole creates an evocative "structure of feeling," in Raymond William's sense, that speaks not only to black gay men — although I can think of no other film which has laid bare our desire and despair in quite the way that it has — but to any desiring subject who has experienced the blues.

I want to conclude with a brief discussion of the issue of authorship, because the work of Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien urges us to rethink questions of identity and agency that many thought were dead and buried with the poststructuralist argument concerning the "death of the author." That these are among the first cinematic texts authored by black gay men means that it really *does* matter who is speaking. We can all live without the return of Romantic notions of creative genius, which always placed the author at the centre of the text — resembling the godlike figure of the "universal intellect" who thought he had an answer for everything — but we need to revise the notion that the author is simply an empty abstract function of cultural discourse through whom various ideologies speak.

The welcomed development of postmodernism that accompanied the collapse of the grand narratives and the decentering of universal Man was that it revealed that the subject who had monopolized the microphone in public culture — by claiming to speak for humanity as a whole, while denying that right of representation to anyone who was not white, not male, not middle-class, and not Western — was nothing but a minority himself. If postmodernism simply means that the era of modernism has past, then hurrah! The pluralization and diversification of public space, where a variety of subjects find their voice and assert their right to speak, has only just begun. As black gay artists, "specific intellectuals" who speak from the specificity of their experience, Riggs and Julien, like other black lesbian and gay artists have actively contributed to the cultural and political terrain of postmodernism.

Precisely because their work is so important, we should do more than merely celebrate. Above all, we should be deeply skeptical of a certain assumption embedded in categorical identity politics that would argue that these films are of aesthetic and political value *because* their authors are black gay men. Throughout this paper I have drawn attention to the formal strategies in *Tongues Untied* and *Looking for*

*Langston* because I want to resist the conflation between artistic value and authorial identity that so often arises in debates on emerging artists. The problem here is not simply that bad works get celebrated alongside good ones but that constructive criticism is inhibited by the fear of being seen to be politically incorrect: if it is assumed that a black film is necessarily good because a black person made it, any criticism of the film is likely to be read as an attack on the very person who made it rather than on the film that was made.

Analogously, we are familiar with that rhetorical strategy of categorical identity politics in which a statement is prefaced by the adjectives that describe one's identity — for example, "As a black gay man, I feel angry about my place in the world." The statement may be entirely valid, but, because it is embedded in my identity, it preempts the possibility of critical dialogue, because your disagreement might be interpreted not as a comment on what I say, but as a criticism of who I am. So, in relation to *Tongues Untied* and *Looking for Langston*, I would adopt an anticelibration position, because I want to emphasize that these rich, provocative, and important works do indeed "make a difference" not because of who or what the filmmakers are, but because of what they do, and above all because of the freaky way they do it.

*CineAction* gratefully acknowledges permission to print the above article from the forthcoming *QueerLooks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gever, John Greyson, Pratibha Parmar, Routledge, New York, 1993.



# Now You Can See It: THE LIBERAL AESTHETIC & RACIAL REPRESENTATION in *The Crying Game*



By Darrell Moore

**T**he liberal aesthetic, in which racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences are represented as external or incidental to the overall narrative, tends to obscure or obliterate those significant differences in such a way as to reify present dominant/subordinate relations. Ideologies of dominance justify the present dominant/subordinate relations that exist between races, genders, and sexualities. They are structured in seemingly natural power relations mediated by difference. The difficulty for a progressive committed to the liberal social contract is to find an avenue that will enable us all to live peaceably and fully within one political community without having to renounce the specificity that ultimately makes our lives worth living. Writer and director Neil Jordan in an effort to help us live the contract takes us down the avenue of "emotional regard" in the face of racial difference, sexual difference, and gender fuck in his latest film *The Crying Game* (1992).

To my mind, Jordan's latest effort is a success and clearly his best released film to date.<sup>1</sup> *The Crying*

*Game* raises epistemological questions that challenge traditional representations of gender and sexuality. Jordan's challenge to his audience is particularly acute as he confronts with a notion of gendered identity that renders the place of genitals to mere details. The notion of identities tendered in this film — gender, national, political — renders our certainties about such matters null and void, or at least questionable. And it creates a volatile brew when it interacts with the complexities of our individual desires and commitments. For example, those of us who link our identity as sexual and gendered individuals too closely to our crotch might find ourselves questioning our heretofore unchallenged supposition.

Or perhaps not, for the only viewers of *The Crying Game* who will take the epistemological musing seriously are those whose disposition enables

<sup>1</sup> Jordan is also the director of *The Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa*, *High Spirits*, *We're No Angels*, and *The Miracle*. He has had two of his novels and a collection of short stories published: *The Past*, *The Dream of a Beast*, and *Night in Tunisia*, respectively.

them to experience the story's twists and turns from the vantage point of someone other than Fergus (Stephen Rea), the character from whose perspective Jordan constructs the film's narrative. However, the film is so structured by Fergus's point of view that thinking seriously about the alternative and ambivalent possibilities are unlikely. I am thinking specifically of the position of the intentionally written black characters Jody (Forest Whitaker) and Dil (Jaye Davidson). To see the story from either or both of their points of view reveals the limitations of the liberal aesthetic. Several avenues of criticism immediately present themselves after experiencing such an engaging and well written film. Here I am interested primarily in the ways in which race and racial representation are manifested.

I assert that Jordan has constructed a film that attempts to expand the liberal paradigm in such a way as to expand regard for the fragile autonomy of others. The connection that Fergus makes to both Jody and Dil lies ultimately in his ability to venture a connection to a broader concept of the universal self over the seemingly more parochial concerns of the Irish Republican Army, especially as represented by Jude (Miranda Richardson) and Peter Maguire (Adrian Dunbar). I argue that although Jordan has drawn two black characters who appear multidimensional and given to subtlety (the same cannot be said of Jude or Peter, who are so driven by their cause that they lose some of their capacity for human connection and novelty), he highlights a form of racial exploitation that is adapted to the contemporary arguments over the politics of representation and multiculturalism. The racial identity of Jody and Dil is obscured due to the touristic qualities of their respective and connected relationship to Fergus.

When the camera pulls away from Dil and Fergus to pan the prison visiting room and "Stand By Your Man" is faded into the prison scene, Lyle Lovett's voice began to merge in my mind with Nat King Cole's version of "Mona Lisa." *The Crying Game* is a more sophisticated and economically executed update to Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986), co-written with David Leland. *Mona Lisa* tells the story of the development and demise of chauffeur George's (Bob Hoskins) relationship with Simone (Cathy Tyson), the call girl he is assigned to drive to her appointments. Both films are motivated by secrets and difference: namely, how Simone and Jody and Dil alter the emotional lives of George and Fergus, the characters from whose point of view the narratives are spun and who are working class, white, male, and straight.

## Or are you just a cold and lonely work of art?

Nat King Cole

Several themes from *Mona Lisa* reappear in *The Crying Game*. Both are in some sense about the transformation of ethical, trusting, and chivalrous working class white men who long for the simple pleasures of life. Their transformation is made possible through their relationships with light skinned black women who have an air of sophistication and mystery about them. They court and develop deep feelings for the women they serve despite the social and ethical prohibitions against it. George's "tall thin black tart" is transformed into "a lady" and he defends her against violent pimps. Fergus defends Dil from her violent former boyfriend Dave and from his boss, Deveroux's, insults ("Consider it how you like. Just get that bloody tart out of here". "Did you ever pick up your teeth with broken fingers?").

George and Fergus's relationships with Simone and Dil take on a noble, or Jesus-like, character. George sets out to search for Simone's friend Cathy who is lost to the seedier side of Mortwell's prostitution, drug, and extortion racket. The climax of the film includes guns, violence, and ultimately betrayal on the streets of Brighton. George realizes that he has "sold myself for a couple of dykes." Simone releases George from his emotional obligation which enables him to escape before the police arrive and find the dead bodies. Fergus becomes keen on Dil as he fulfills Jody's request that he look after his "special friend." Fergus's entanglements with Jude, Maguire, and the I.R.A. lead to a climax of guns, violence, and betrayal. The difference is that neither Jody nor Dil releases Fergus from his obligation to look after her, perhaps because Fergus's entanglements are of his own making. At any rate, both George and Fergus spend seven years in jail because they embrace the responsibility for a crime that someone they were loyal to committed. Their naivete gets them involved with black women who are not what they appear to be — to them.

Thus, from one perspective George and Fergus are being used. From another perspective their characters derive pleasure from consuming the vulnerable women that they have taken on responsibility to protect. Fergus protects Dil simply because Jody asked him to and because Dil, in the words of Fergus, "would be anybody's type." George puts himself out for Simone because he wants her: "Why





am I doing this?" "Because I asked you. Because you fancy me. But you can't have me, any prick can have me." Interestingly, George and Fergus fail to understand the experiences that would lead to a devaluation of the genitals: Simone interprets her prostitution as "just me and a piece of meat, George" and Dil renders the penis as "details, baby, details."

*The Crying Game* opens at a carnival in Northern Ireland. The camera descends from a clear and wide open sky, which fosters a sense that freedom and love are in the air. On the carnival grounds we are focused on Jody's (Forest Whitaker) presence, which is not difficult to do for he is the only black man at the carnival and his size and disposition make him conspicuous. His presence is curious because he is cavorting with Jude, who is blonde and petite. Jody appears rather sloppy and inarticulate. Nonetheless, he and Jude appear to be having fun and the image that springs to mind is a prelude to illicit sex.

In London, the courtship between Fergus (aka Jimmy) and Dil seems less illicit, perhaps because it takes place in London. The illicit nature of their relationship, at least for Fergus, is the presence of Jody prior to the abrupt end of his sexual intimacy with Dil. Once their sexual relationship is over, the illicitness shifts to the surreal nature of their continued emotional intimacy. Just what is Fergus going to do? What should he do?

I dwell on the idea of the illicit to suggest that part of the reason why *The Crying Game* works for so many people is because it flirts with the activities that profoundly violate social norms, but it never actually violates them. The presence of social, sexual, and emotional norms are determined and regulated, in large part by, the black presence. The blackness of Jody and Dil is a necessary device to insure that *The Crying Game* simultaneously relies upon and tweaks audience norms, which in turn relies upon the fantasies about black people that enable norms to flourish. For example, the fluidity and stability of stereotypes about the predatory nature of black male sexual desire and the sexual lasciviousness of black female sexuality precludes the very notion that any black person would relegate the genitals to mere accessories.

The energy surrounding the possibility of a sexual liaison between Jody and Jude would be qualitatively different if Jody were white. Dil brings spectacle to *The Crying Game*; she enhances the exciting exotic qualities for the audience. Jody and Dil provide new experiences for Fergus, and while he goes along for the ride he never gets too involved with the individuals who make his novel experiences possible. He never commits to Dil with the full knowledge of who she is. Why does he go to jail for her? Is he in love with her or does he recognize that Dil actually

saved his life? Was it love or duty? As he cleans Dil's fingerprints from the gun, he looks at Jody's picture and says "You should have stayed home." Perhaps, it should be stated the other way around, for it is his story. Fergus is the one whose crisis of identity and commitment leads him on a trip.

As viewers with different, and occasionally opposed perspectives, we experience the aforementioned scenes from Fergus's point of view, and in both cases there is a notable transformation of the way he sees the world and Jody and Dil, respectively. In the first, we see Jody with his arm around Jude, who is Fergus's girlfriend. Jody appears to be a lurching drunk black man, and the contrast between him and his environment is stark. After Jody is kidnapped Fergus perceives him differently. He is sober, funny, witty, and emotionally vulnerable. The puzzle is the transformation of Fergus's vision of Jody: how does it happen?

A before/after juxtaposition also exists in how we /Fergus see(s) Dil: initially, as a woman, and then as a woman with a dick. It might all be details, baby, but we /Fergus have /has to get used to those details. And as Fergus struggles to come to terms with his experience and representations, the world around him changes. When Fergus returns to the Metro the night after running out on Dil ("Jesus, I feel sick"), he sees the world as he should have seen it the first time he stepped foot in the Metro, a transvestite bar. We experience Fergus's sudden-sight. The drag queens become grotesquely exaggerated attempts to feign femininity. We wonder that someone of Dil's calibre would frequent such a place.

Somehow Fergus is enabled through his relationship with Jody and Dil to see the world more clearly, in ways that were not available to him during his years in the I.R.A. What are the processes that enable this to occur?

During the hostage scenes in Northern Ireland, Jody — in a series of gestures similar to those of *Mona Lisa's* Simone — appeals to Fergus's kind nature in an effort to save his life. (In fact both *Mona Lisa* and *The Crying Game* are re-presentations of the Frog-into-Prince fairy tale told from the frog's point of view, and as in the original, the frog has to be kissed to be transformed.) Jody successfully convinces Fergus that he has a good nature, one that enables Fergus to recognize their common humanity. In gestures that appeal to Fergus's "frog" nature, Jody flatters him, "You're the one about five ten with the killer smile and the baby face." Jody makes himself vulnerable to Fergus as an individual and

convinces him to remove the bag from his head, one of the many literal and figurative covers that motivate Jordan's film. He shows him pictures of his girl, Dil, and engages Fergus in a masculine joust over the relative quickness of cricket and hurling. He tops it off with a parable that subtly indicates that Fergus's good nature is being taken advantage of by people who do not have his best interests at heart: "And as they (the frog and the scorpion) both sink beneath the waves the frog cries out, 'Why did you sting me, Mr. Scorpion, for now we both will drown?'" Scorpion replies, "I can't help it, it's in my nature."

Fergus is drawn against the grain. He lacks the severe businesslike nature of Jude and Maguire. Maguire gives the orders and grows violent, butting a cigarette in Fergus's hand, when he gets emotional. And, of course, Maguire gets himself killed in an effort to assassinate a "legitimate target," despite the fact that it will not advance the goals of the I.R.A.

Jody's appeal to Fergus's "kind nature" focuses the viewers' attention on the relative power relations between the two. Fergus is at once a guard for and a captive of a way of life. On the other hand, Jody is a guard for and a captive of the British state: he is in this predicament because of his racialized class position in British society. Jody claims that he was not attracted to Jude at all. He was drawn to her as a vehicle for understanding his presence as part of the occupying force in Northern Ireland:

**Jody:** *Okay. That nice lady. Meets me in a bar. I'm saying what the fuck am I doing here anyway.*

**Fergus:** *What the fuck were you doing here?*

**Jody:** *I got sent.*

**Fergus:** *You could have said no.*

**Jody:** *Can't. Once I signed up.*

**Fergus:** *Why did you sign up?*

**Jody:** *It was a job. So I get sent to the only place in the world they call you nigger to your face.*

**Fergus:** *Shouldn't take it personally.*

**Jody:** *"Go back to your banana tree, nigger." No use telling them I came from Tottenham.*



Once Jody's internal colonial predicament becomes clear to Fergus, he ceases to defend the Irish and defuses the situation with the suggestion that Jody should not take being called a nigger personally. Doing duty in Northern Ireland is particularly hellish for black men because, according to Jody, they forgo the pleasantries of Tottenham; no picnic itself. Fergus is an exceptional Irishman because he is in the I.R.A. and because he does not make conscious distinctions based on race. His experience with Jody does nothing less than profoundly transform his person. He stands as an example of how we might move beyond race.

The racial representation in *The Crying Game* is touristic. Racial tourism, which many guises of multiculturalism amount to because of the presence of interaction and emotional regard, gives the appearance that it dismantles apartheid. However, as it appears to offer genuine respect for difference under one political banner, it also manages to reproduce social formations of inequality. Thus, as Rutherford argues, "Otherness is sought after for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrill and adventures it can offer. The power relation is closer to tourism than imperialism, an expropriation of meaning rather than materials."<sup>2</sup> Jody's and Dil's presence are commodified at several levels. First, Jody's experience as a man in an army that he does not want to be in is valued not for itself but because of what it does for Fergus. Fergus wants, in a metaphorical sense, to have Jody's experience. He needs to know that there is a difference in knowing that one is in for instrumental rather than ideological reasons. In the process we become less concerned about Jody's will and his capacity to act. This is not to claim that Fergus and Jody do not become friends over the course of their three days together. I am suggesting that it is through their relationship that Fergus is able to redefine himself. The second aspect of touristic racial representation that operates is *The Crying Game's* point of view. The notion of interpretation plays a substantial role in the ability of narrative to render an experience or a point. The process of interpretation is structured by the narrative that the screenwriter and director, Jordan, constructs and the myriad ways in which the individuals in the narrative come to life and interact with others. There is a contingency at operation and it sways on a pivot. The character through whose eyes we see suggests how the circle of culture gets drawn: who's in, who's out, why, and to what effect.

Dil's character clearly is counter-intuitive, for the

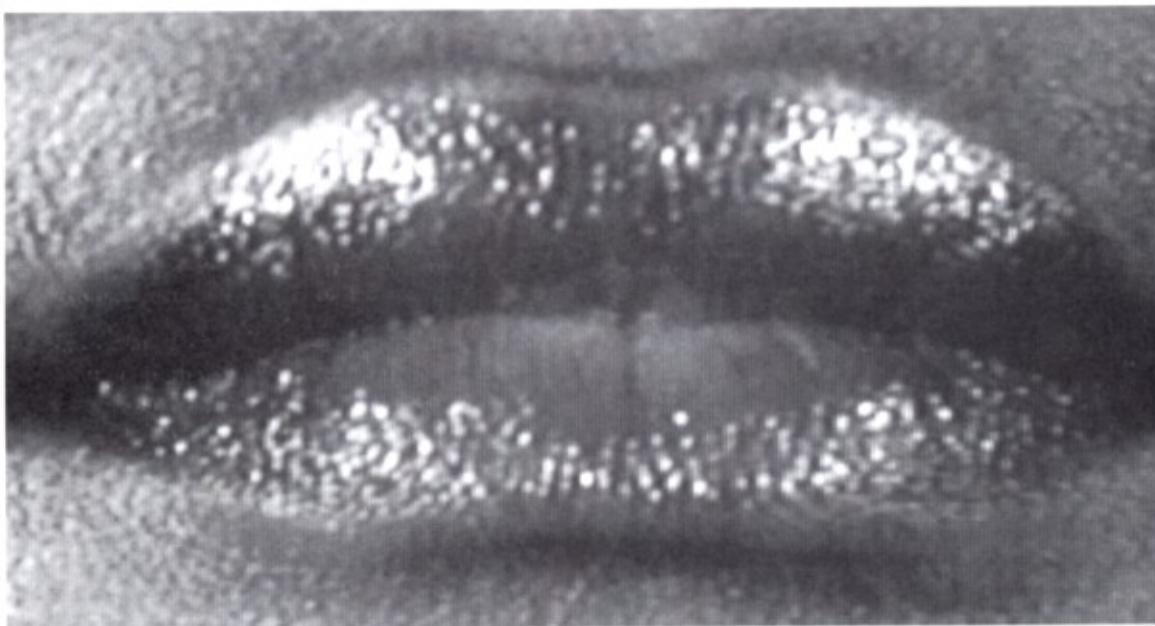
secret that she carries within her undergarments is only a secret because Fergus does not see it, not because she hides it. Fergus renders her invisible until she's in his face and he cannot fantasize about her in the way he did during their courting rituals at the Metro. The narrative structure robs Dil of her subjectivity and will. One way out is to privilege the problematic of the secret — that epistemological foundation of the hetero-homo dichotomy and the dominating understanding of homosexuality. This visual strategy only works if the viewer struggles to see and experience the world from Dil's point of view, a highly unlikely probability, unless one brings questions of oppositional subjectivity to the film. The film itself does not offer that possibility.

Even if we are able to privilege the problematic of the secret, it cannot do much to stem the spectacle that Dil becomes as she unravels and gives over to lines like "And the fact that you didn't know is basically the fault of yours truly. And even when you were throwing up, I could tell you cared" and "I can't help what I am." She becomes the black woman with the hidden nature: mysterious, exceptional, peculiar, and secretive. Dil becomes "something else," "definitely unusual," "the wee little black chick" to the point where she does not "recognize" herself. Dil's experience becomes intensely commodified when seen through the eyes of Fergus.

The irony in *The Crying Game* stems from the progressive liberal aesthetic, which represents emotional relations across race and sexuality as well as creating interesting female characters of colour. This aesthetic is limited because the attempts to include race, gender, and sexuality are well meaning, but it does not enable the audience to examine the ways in which they are included. Thus, in a significant sense Jody and Dil are dehumanized by the Fergus's touring experience. It is not a simple separation from the Other. It is continued cultural domination that distances Jody and, particularly, Dil from themselves. We are forced to struggle to see them in ways other than from the position of Fergus.

<sup>2</sup> Johnathan Rutherford, "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference" in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), p. 11.

Whispers Of Kisses



# **Don't Go to Dat Place and Fool Around Like Rich Girls':**

**Black Canadian Women  
Filmmakers and Video Artists**

**by Gabrielle Hezekiah**

*From the time of Harriet Tubman to these times in the mid-1970s, black women have struggled to realize themselves as women and as creative beings.<sup>2</sup>*

*Old folks shared their sense that we had come out of slavery into this free space and we had to create a world that would renew the spirit, that would make it life-giving. In that house there was a sense of history.<sup>3</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> In *From Nerve To...*, 1987, Christene Browne.

<sup>2</sup> In *Some Black Women*, 1976, Roger McTair, dir., Claire Prieto, prod.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: strange and oppositional" in *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 104.



I employ these quotations for reasons specific to the production of film and video by black Canadian women. Each is written or narrated by a black woman living and working in North America. The women are from different locations yet they describe a shared psychic space created by a history of oppression. While they certainly do not describe all black women's experiences, these quotations suggest themes that are evident in much of the work discussed in this article. The first, the title of my piece, is a bit of advice given to the protagonist in Christene Brown's *From Nevis To...* by her mother when she moved to Canada. It is profoundly utilitarian and comes out of an experience of exclusion. It is reminiscent of the relationship between black people and education in the colonial West Indies and other parts of the world operating under a similar system. Being a "rich girl," in this context, is often associated with being white, but it is also a state of mind. bell hooks reminds us that our parents' childrearing practices were often intended to "toughen us up" and prepare us to meet the racist world outside.<sup>4</sup> We were taught to be mindful. The privilege that came with being a "rich girl" allowed certain women access, not only to power which was outside the reach of the "average" black woman but also to forms of expression which were not seen as essential to individual or collective survival. Black women seeking to "better themselves" were women on a mission and could suffer no distractions. Making the leap from this psychosocial history to film, there are at least two levels on which this could be read. The first would not tolerate the "trivial pursuit" of such arts as filmmaking; this is less relevant today. The second would support creative expression, but admonishes its practitioners to take their work seriously — not to fool around — to ensure that their work contributes to the overall survival of the community. Issues of what has been called elsewhere a "cinema of duty" arise here.

The second quotation is from "...*Some Black Women*," produced and directed by Claire Prieto and Roger McTair, two of Canada's first black filmmakers — originally from Trinidad and Tobago. The images evoked here are ones of historical continuity, struggle, creativity and voice. In many ways, the quotation explains the mother's advice in the first film and deals with the intersection of gender and race.

In the last passage, bell hooks is describing the "lived aesthetics" of her grandmother's house. She talks about the role of beauty in the lives of "agrarian poor black folks" in the Southern United States and how that role has been fundamentally altered by the consumer ethic of late capitalism. hooks' project is about space and serves as a reminder that "we must learn to see."

Film and video by black Canadian women form a

small but significant and growing body of work. As more and more work is produced and becomes widely available, specific trends and ways of looking will emerge. Given that there is, as yet, no clearly formulated school of black Canadian film and video production by women, I offer here provisional approaches to this burgeoning material.

## context

Black Canadian women have been engaged in filmmaking and video art since the 1970s, working on independent, as well as government and community-sponsored productions. In recent years, the National Film Board (NFB) has hired a number of black women directors on contract, most notably for the "Women at the Well" series produced by Studio D. As Cameron Bailey<sup>5</sup> has pointed out, there were few options available to black women filmmakers who relied on establishments such as the NFB for financial support and who had not had the opportunity to attend arts institutions where they might have been exposed to experimental techniques. The early work therefore followed established documentary patterns. Even the NFB productions by black women directors in the late 1980s, though more committed, have remained squarely within this documentary tradition. Some may criticize them for being less formally challenging and not worthy of analysis. I would suggest, however, that there is a thread running through them and the more contemporary productions — they are but variations on a theme, with fewer clear distinctions between the old and the new than one might expect.

Some of the most recent work by black women has been produced on video. This new emphasis on video is not simply a reflection of the increasing accessibility of the medium and of the influence of the video art movement. Content and visual language are equally important. The extended ramifications of this shift cannot, however, be discussed here for reasons of space. Much of this recent work has been produced as part of student programs, internships or workshops in such centres across the country as Banff, Toronto, Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver. Newer productions experiment with form and themes that might appear to be more complex than those explored by earlier filmmakers. Some, like Glace W. Lawrence's *The Colour of Immunity*, are closely linked to pro-active black community organizations. The

<sup>4</sup>bell hooks, *Sisters in the Yam: black women and self-recovery*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Cameron Bailey, "A Cinema of Duty: The Films of Jennifer Hodge de Silva," in *Cineaction*, No. 23, Winter 1990-91, pp. 4-12.



*Home Feeling*



*Speak It!*



*Sisters In Struggle*

"older" filmmakers (those who have been producing since the 1970s and those working within more traditional documentary forms) with few exceptions are still producing work today and it is therefore interesting to compare their new and early work with that of the more recent film and videomakers. What might be regarded as experimental work by young black women deals mainly with biography, autobiography and identity, but even at its most artistically innovative much of it could still be considered documentary.

## documentary practice

Conditions do not favour access by black women to the image-making apparatuses of this society. Following Kobena Mercer and Jim Pines, it is safe to say that the narrative of race and gender relations in this country is one which has determined the representation of black women, not only in terms of actual stereotyping but in the ways in which those stereotypes are encoded.<sup>7</sup> The aim of many black women in film and video, therefore, has been to disrupt the dominant narrative and find spaces within which to "realize themselves as women and as creative human beings." The ways in which black women have had to struggle to make this space and control images of themselves in film is not vastly different from strategies used in other situations, where so often there is simply no leeway to "fool around." Given the constraints under which many of these women work, it is not surprising that they have had to find space to do this within already existing structures. This is not to say that all black women, regardless of class (to cite only one example), stand in equally subjugated relation to the image-making process. Nor is it meant to suggest that finding and "making do" with small pockets of space is enough. I would suggest, however, that we have much to lose by dismissing small-scale but significant strategies of potential subversion within the dominant documentary form.

The four "filmic values" of documentaries, as listed by Mercer — transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity — lend themselves to the kind of corrective strategy employed by blacks (and, I would add, other marginalized groups) both in dramatic fiction and in documentary itself.<sup>8</sup> Black Canadian film and video has not differed widely from this pattern. Cameron Bailey has explored in some detail the work of Jennifer Hodge de Silva and her use of documentary realism.<sup>9</sup> While Bailey recognizes the very traditional strategies used by Hodge de Silva, he examines the ways in which she subverts tradition (specifically in *Home Feeling*) — he finds the spaces that she has made. Hodge de Silva's strategy has informed the work of many black women in the field today. Unlike some of the British work Mercer describes, black Canadian film and video does not seem to place as much emphasis on "reality-effect" cinema. Instead, the work tends to be what Mercer calls "counter-informational." This is a direct result of having to counter not only negative stereotypes but also the misinformation that black women simply did not exist.

...*Some Black Women*, produced in 1976, documents infor-

<sup>7</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation" in *Black Film British Cinema* (ICA Document # 7), (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts), pp. 4-14. Mercer discusses Pines' argument of how the "race-relations narrative" informs the aesthetic principles of black British film.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> "Reflections" in *Black on Screen: Images of Black Canadians 1950s — 1990s*, (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada), p. 3.



mation unavailable through the mainstream media on the experiences of black women. The ellipses here and in *From Nevis To...* are significant, for they tell different parts of the same story. One is about untold histories of black women, the other about history in the making. Historical photographs, drawings, interviews and voice-over are fairly standard documentary practices used in *...Some Black Women* and the factory and home sequences add to its realist feel. However its subject matter and perspective were untraditional at the time. This film adds a psychological dimension to understanding the problems faced by black women, and particularly black West Indian women living in Toronto. It was more immediate than subsequent work because of its relationship to the civil rights and Black Power movements and issues of immigration, which were topical in the 1970's. Clothes, hair-styles and speech patterns prevalent in black communities of the day also locate this film within statements of

black identity and black subjectivity. Though *...Some Black Women* was produced at a time when notions of black community tended to be essentialist — and that does come across in the film — these women speak of the intersections of race and gender and the dilemmas that arise from their unique position within the system. The women link social and economic structures to the relationships in their lives in ways which make for a more human understanding of how oppression actually works. This is political documentary with voices of black women as authority. The pointed social and political insight in this film remains largely unmatched except for work such as *Sisters in the Struggle* by Dionne Brand and Ginny Stikeman (which takes analyses of gender and sexuality further, while maintaining notions of community) and the work of Christene Browne.

*Black Mother, Black Daughter*, co-directed by Claire Prieto and Sylvia Hamilton for the NFB, relates the

stories of several black women and their daughters in Nova Scotia. Some of these are "cultural" and "spiritual" daughters (at least one is adopted) which speaks to the nature of community among these women. The film is narrated by Sylvia Hamilton, who locates herself at the outset as a black Nova Scotian and the daughter of one of those interviewed. This establishes

a human link between the usually unseen director and the subject and leads to the anticipation and eventual realization of a certain level of intimacy throughout the film. The older women describe the discrimination they have faced in their lives and there is an emphasis on church, community and dignity in the struggle for survival and equality. (Hamilton's later work, *Speak It!* about black youth organizing in Nova Scotia, presents less conservative approaches to anti-racist action and it is interesting that in a few short years this director has managed to present and validate alternative perspectives on similar issues.) *Black Mother, Black Daughter* is autobiographical. Not only is the filmmaker telling her

personal story and that of her mother, she is also telling the story of other women in her community. Her narrative is the narrative of the community and lives on in her daughter.

Claire Prieto has described herself as a child of the independence movement in the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup> Her heroes were international black and Third World leaders. The films she makes are intended to help black people in Canada (especially children) "understand our identity and continually changing place in the world" and define our past and future — our reality. Perhaps this has something to do with the different approaches to the search for identity found in earlier and more recent work. Prieto's comments would seem to suggest that filmmakers of her era were operating as part of a larger context of collective struggle for identity. Problems of identity were there, to be sure, but these were issues to be worked on in community. (It is perhaps not surprising that a number of



*Black Mother, Black Daughter*

recent productions, which are likely to fall into the categories of experimental or postmodern, are more closely tied to questions of identity politics than work produced ten years ago.)

*Traces* by Julia Browne Figueroa exemplifies this experimentation, offering a fresh and innovative approach to the identity dilemma facing an African-Canadian woman. Against a black screen voices of women tell us about those who have changed their names from European to African. The narrator challenges her own authority and those of anthropological sources when she asks, "what did I know?" Her knowledge of Africa has been gleaned from National Geographic, while her reality is one of integration and invisibility in Canada. This fast-paced film moves from images in magazines to shots of women in the streets of Africa. Figueroa deals with self-image, with the gaze and with cultural continuity between Africa and Canada (we all Steups!). This is obviously a quest for identity, while at the same time the work suggests the constructed nature of identity and the problems inherent in a "return to Africa." What is most successful in Figueroa's film is the challenge to authenticity and authority ("take off those robes — you're faking it!"). The role of colonialism in shaping the images we have of ourselves is also suggested, but since there is no direct relationship between the commentary and the visual, there is no "evidence of truth." The blank screen here invites probing — it does not invite assimilation of "historical fact" — and this is precisely the point. Yet the feeling remains that though we recognize our fragmented and uncertain positions in this world, we do not understand the historical reasons for our unease, our homelessness.

*Mami Wata* by Montreal-based Haitian videoartist Monik Dofen is closer to exploring notions of black women in community. In a more conventional documentary style, Dofen successfully captures issues of identification in their complexity — who defines herself as black and why? This is also a rare opportunity to look at the life of a black francophone woman with deep roots in Quebec as well as the lives of other women who have only recently arrived. There is also a significant number of women who do not feel it necessary to "confess" when they have arrived. The work is important in this regard — it sets up a new kind of questioning (directly and through omission) of what it means to be a black Canadian woman. Accents also play a role in diversifying the meanings of "black woman" and "Quebecoise." Spontaneous shifts between English and French as the women attempt to communicate their experiences across language and brief explorations of the supposedly "uniform" Haitian relationship to voodoo also speak to issues of difference and coalition-building. Moments

of poetry, the history of black women in slavery (Marie Joseph Angelique) and African-Caribbean dance are reminiscent of Frances-Ann Solomon's *I is a long-remembered woman*, produced in Britain.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps significant that both directors are from the Caribbean. The theme of recovering Africa and slavery as a means of collective self-recovery does not seem to be a strong one among Canadian-born black women or West Indian-born filmmakers who have come through the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

One work which has been influenced by recent black British film production is *Colour Corrected* by Selina Williams in Vancouver. This is a student production which explores what it means to be of mixed African and European ancestry in Canada. Poetic in its descriptions of what it feels like to be labelled at will by "both sides" and held up as exotic and "not really black," this film uses close-ups and narration to penetrate the emotions of the characters. The theme of drowning runs through this narrative. We overhear the conversations of a man and two women of mixed racial heritage as they speak with white companions at different tables in a restaurant. Exchanged glances and shots of the three in imaginary locations outside of the "real" develop a sense of a community of outsiders. Though this piece is certainly not a documentary in any strict sense of the word, it is in a sense autobiographical and, like the older work, it seeks a sense of community and of history very specific to the filmmaker's identity and reality in this place.

On the whole, it is not the case in Canada as it is in Britain that the "new" black independent film scene can be seriously chastised for being inaccessible to "the black community," however that community is defined. Generally work is not overtly "theoretical" (Donna James' *Whispers of Kisses* is one exception that comes to mind) or as firmly grounded in black oppositional literary traditions or European critical social theories. But does this make Canadian production less valid or diminish its political potential?

Though very fast, innovative and fresh in its presentation, Nadine K. Rowe's *The Noise* moves in the direction of earlier work which focused on understanding, on moving beyond stereotypes and on "walking a mile in the other person's shoes." Rowe's piece opens with the music of Public Enemy and some stereotypical images of "the black ghetto." The conversation that sets the tone for the entire piece is one between a black woman and white man. He feels that she is not "really black" because she doesn't act that way. He talks about images of blacks that he has

<sup>11</sup> James Snead, "Black Independent Film: Britain and America", in *Black Film British Cinema* (ICA Document 7), (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988), pp. 47-50.





*Maigre Dog*

received from the mass media and, through a symbolic exchange of black and white masks, she tries to get him to see things from her perspective. If we assume that Rowe is trying to convert a white audience which has not yet unlearned its racism, then we can say that she invites the audience into the piece. The entire film is a pedagogical tool and initially embraces many of the assumptions of Canada's multicultural narrative. Yet Rowe successfully surpasses such narrow limitations. She is not afraid to show stereotypical images of "homeboys" stealing hubcaps or black youth (male and female) dancing to hiphop without any narration to counteract, explain or interpret them. She allows the audience to question itself and draw its own conclusions. In a series of three lively vignettes, the filmmaker shows "everyday racism" at work. Perhaps the most incisive is the one describing the new fetish for the "ethnic" look through animation. Changing images, for Rowe, are part of an evolution. The new vogue around "ethnic" physical features is traced historically and quite soundly linked to racism and the self-image of black women. Here, black women are not merely victims. This is not the case with the other two vignettes which position black men and women as being incapable of asserting any agency over the "problem" of race. In the scenes described above, where black men are villains, they are treated simply as a type among many. Rowe locates fluidity in very concrete circumstances. This fluidity indicates that change is possible — that racism can be unlearned. There is less of a sense of despair than there is in Figueroa's piece — perhaps because it

is grounded in history. Though this piece does not fully escape the dominant narratives of race, it successfully uses transparency and authenticity to bring fresh perspective. Authority is located, not in the voice of the narrator or of the protagonist, but in the images themselves.

Christene Browne's *From Nevis To...* is innovative in a more deeply contemplative way. Shot in black and white and following the character from her arrival at the airport to her hotel room, this narrative gives a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of a young black woman who has left a government job as a nurse in Nevis to stay eventually with a sister in Montreal. Her future is uncertain, but, like many before her, she feels that this is the most practical thing to do. *From Nevis To...* hovers among narrative fiction, documentary and autobiography. In a sense it is autobiography, the biography of a community. We also get a rare look at how Canada is constructed in the minds of some Third World immigrants before they arrive. The opening airport sequences with their barely comprehensible airline announcements, trolleys, escalators, fast music and crowds of people locate the young woman in a web of confusion. At the hotel, photographs from home and the voice of her mother seem to connect her to a past which will make it less difficult to move on into the future.

Donna James's *Maigre Dog* is a brilliant example of subverting the dominant documentary tradition. Although it might be considered video art, *Maigre Dog* is indeed autobiographical. I say this because James traces the history of her people through language — the history of her own family and the history of Jamaicans in Canada. *Maigre Dog* subverts the ethnographic film tradition in at least two ways. First, the tape never shows its subjects. Those who are being questioned about their culture are in the same visual space as the ethnographer/videomaker — offscreen. Their visual relationship to the viewer is therefore similar. Second, the use of Jamaican women to relate and explain "folk" sayings is significant because of the peculiar place in which many Caribbean nation-languages find themselves. The existence of a linguistic continuum in Jamaica and other parts of the region means that these women are in a position to translate themselves. They speak Jamaican and English. They move easily between the two. There is no separate anthropologist's informant and interpreter.

The "ethnographic" feel of informant and anthropologist is decentred when we recognize that these women are "playing" at being "natives." They are, to be sure, members of the culture, but they are actors and the nuances in their speech belie the constructedness of the dialogue. The interventions of the filmmaker/ethnographer directing the actors, "say

that one" or "I really like that one," is even more pointed. "Aunt" is not really an aunt at all. These are actors who are at the same time genuine ethnographic informants. Is the ethnographer really an ethnographer? This brings back memories of slave histories of dissimulation. In this piece, the art of dissimulation is firmly grounded in African and African-Jamaican cultural traditions (see the sign language of the secret societies in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*)<sup>12</sup> and also in the history of slavery and the social configurations and modes of communication which it enforced. There is a groundedness in the exploration of dissimulation, visibility and illusion that is absent in the other works already mentioned.

I would like to examine briefly what it might mean for Donna James to produce this deeply contemplative work, which has been described as dealing with the displacement of collective history. As someone raised in the Caribbean, I read the work quite differently. I saw it as celebration. While recognizing the pain of loss and dislocation, I was also forced to rethink and contemplate not simply the expressions themselves, but how they are uttered and the sheer joy and laughter which they elicit from ethnographer and informants. James is in fact creating a new language, for what she does is produce these expressions in a new context. "Aunt" and her companion uttering the same expressions in the Jamaican context would not be the same. This is one result, perhaps unintended, of the use and subversion of ethnographic techniques. James's work is placed within the larger context of post-independence struggles for nation-language and raises the question of who has the privilege to speak of nations as imagined communities in ways which might negate the very possibility of constructive political resistance within the context of "nationhood."

The work begins with a dictionary definition of "maigre" as an adjective meaning "lean, thin, meager, meatless." Its origin is French. The use of the definition could be seen as an ethnographic marker setting up the tape as one in which written text will interpret the oral traditions that follow. Yet apart from this text at the beginning no more definitions appear. The "folk sayings" are fixed in text on the screen (and sometimes they are written in a mixture of Jamaican and English that does not always correspond to the words we hear), but the women themselves define and explain their words. Like many others, the word "maigre" has taken on Jamaican meaning. In *Maigre Dog* the history of colonization and the very hybridity it breeds is brought into focus, reminding us of Paul Gilroy's assertion that:

<sup>12</sup>Described in Julie Dash, with Toni Cade Bambara and bell hooks, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, (New York: The New Press), 1992.





*Whispers of Kisses*

"...our cultural politics is actually not about depthlessness but about depth, not about the waning of affect but about its preservation and reproduction, not about the suppression of temporal patterns but about history itself."<sup>13</sup>

## look again

To look is already to create. The transparency of documentary realism has been used to advantage by (white) feminist and black (male) filmmakers as a strategy for making work accessible to mass audiences and as a way of producing counter-information. In strict film theory terms, this could have led to a detailed and highly reified discussion of suture and audience identification. I choose instead to provide provisional glimpses into some black Canadian women's film and video works which I feel exemplify and reflect a lived aesthetic and cultural gesture.

### Self-image

...slow motion video, silence, a black woman takes a shower — washes her hair, there is rage and pain on her face, we are forced to contemplate her image, her mouth is the last thing we see. (*Blood*)

...we look over the shoulder of a black woman flipping through a mainstream "woman's magazine," she becomes frustrated/disgusted with the images of thin white and black women and throws the magazine to the floor. (*D-E-S-I-R-E*)

...fast images, cut and pasted from "women's magazines" targeting black audiences. (*Women of Strength, Women of Beauty*)

...fast images, cut and pasted from "women's magazines." A black woman tosses the magazine into the air and onto the floor. (*Traces*)

### Subjectivity

Rosemary gets a job at Patty Palace after much searching. She relates this to another black woman outside of the restaurant. The second woman is sympathetic. Rosemary is happy and relieved. She seems oblivious to the camera. She raises her hand to her mouth in a gesture we recognize...(*Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community*)

Singer Jodie Drake talks to the video producer while applying her make-up. She is preparing for a performance. She talks about her husband getting in the way when she does her make-up. Jodie Drake looks into the mirror. She too seems oblivious to the camera...(*Jodie Drake*)

### Sexuality

Two young black people discuss "safe sex," make love — and both enjoy it!...(*The Colour of Immunity*)

Two young lovers giggle over "sex toys"...(*anOTHER love story*)

### Lived Aesthetics

Black women sit at a table weaving baskets and telling stories about their lives, their families and how they came to weaving. They are shaping space with their hands and recreating history in the telling...(*Black Mother, Black Daughter*)

Two black women weave cloth on a loom...(*Black Mother, Black Daughter*)

One of the things we need to focus on in black Canadian women's film and video is what it means to see images of ourselves which are familiar but not stereotypical. The tendency to say that we "know people just like that" which has been one of the criti-

cisms levelled against documentary realism is not necessarily negative. When we are forced to contemplate ourselves in the many ways that we "really are" there is potential for oppositional looking.

There are many questions to be raised with respect to film and video by black Canadian women. To what extent does their work continue to be circumscribed by the very filmic strategies which have supported the status quo? Is a reliance on these strategies necessarily inadequate in the present day or is such thinking itself contained within an expectation that this work must bear the "burden of representation?" Is it possible to create a sense of history in the midst of change? How do these artists confront changing notions of community? What informs the choice of experimental techniques in recent work? Where is the arena of contestation in experimental film and video? What are the new directions for black women's work?

If we hope to see more of this work in active distribution and exhibition, we must begin to take ownership of it as part of the creative landscape of this country — the kind of ownership which implies responsibility, critique and constructive engagement. We have "come to dis place" in black women's work. We can no longer afford to "fool around."

### Films and videos cited

- From Nervs To...* Christene Browne, 1987  
*...Some Black Women*, Roger McTair, dir., Claire Prieto, prod., 1976  
*Sisters in the Struggle*, Dionne Brand, Ginny Stikeman, 1991  
*Women at the Well*  
*Black Mother, Black Daughter*, Sylvia Hamilton, Claire Prieto 1989  
*Speak It!*, Sylvia Hamilton, 1993  
*Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community*, Jennifer Hodge, dir., 1983  
*Traces*, Julia Browne Figueroa, 1991  
*Mami Wata*, Monik Dofen, 1991  
*I is a long-remembered woman*, Frances-Ann Solomon, 1990  
*Colour Corrected*, Selina Williams, 1992  
*The Noise*, Nadine K. Rowe, dir., Kathy Sperberg, prod.  
*Maigre Dog*, Donna James, 1990  
*Blood*, Buseje Bailey, 1992  
*D-E-S-I-R-E*, Glace W. Lawrence, 1989  
*Jodie Drake*, Christene Browne, 1990  
*The Colour of Immunity*, Glace W. Lawrence, 1991  
*anOTHER love story*, Gabrielle Micallef, dir., Debbie Douglas prod. & writ. *Older Stronger Wiser*, Claire Prieto, 1989, is also part of the *Women at the Well* series though it is not specifically mentioned.

Thanks to CFMDC, Full Frame Film & Video, V Tape and individual producers.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Gilroy, "Nothing But Sweat Inside my Hand: Diaspora Aesthetics and Black Arts in Britain", in *Black Film British Cinema* (ICA Document # 7), (London: Institute for the Contemporary Arts, 1988), p. 46.



## small pleasures: large rewards

by Xiaoping Li



*Small Pleasures* relates the loves and struggles of two youngish Chinese women, Sally and Zhao, who migrate to Toronto to begin a new life in the spring of 1989. Like many immigrant tales that have preceded it, Keith Lock's *Small Pleasures* registers the experience of displacement. The narrative is built upon the uncertainties, disappointments, exploitations, adaptations, the "torn between two cultures" scenario that many, many Canadians have lived and still live. The reality-based plot, however, does not over-burden its tone or detract from the film's innumerable "small pleasures": the flush of recognition is matched by delight in its visual sumptuousness. The music, composed by Huang An-Lun (originally from the People's Republic of China) and Kirk Elliot, serves the hybrid efforts of the film well. Its mix of Chinese classical, folk and Western sounds propels the narrative and carried me through an emotional tour from tranquility to turmoil and back again—reflecting my own recent "journey"—my own exile from China.

Although linked to earlier immigrant tales, *Small Pleasures* radically departs from these efforts—it surpasses the commonplace outsider's story. While low budget, it's still an inside job. For filmmaker Keith Lock, *Small Pleasures* represents a search for roots, for his Beijing Ren (people), in the hopes of recovering that which has been lost. Before they immigrated to Canada at the beginning of this century Lock's

own grandparents lived in Beijing. A third generation Chinese-Canadian, he grew up in middle class white suburbia, the only Chinese at his high school; Lock admits "unconsciously, I didn't want to be Chinese." (As we know, Fanonian-like racial self-hatred is all too common to those socialized in a white-dominated culture.) The making of *Small Pleasures*, a film about people from Beijing, offers his most recent effort to reconnect with his ancestors. In a self-effacing gesture Lock admits that Danny, a character who is a "totally Westernized Chinese-Canadian who at long last finds his roots," is modeled after himself.

In spite of the filmmaker's will towards origin and authenticity, *Small Pleasures'* achievement lies precisely in its complex representation of Chinese identity in Canada, Toronto specifically. The film demonstrates an understanding that various "ethnic Chinese" living here who claim a shared heritage cannot be collapsed into a totalized single identity. The word "Chinese" means a myriad number of experiences, traditions and values—it is not undifferentiated. In this way *Small Pleasures'* decidedly intraracial nature eschews a "multicultulti" celebration of common Chineseness by demonstrating difference within. Relations are not, most significantly, played out to a white dominant. Interracial relation-

ships are not privileged, and thus the mainstay of most racial representations, the normalization of white superiority, is avoided. This act is courageous, sometimes risking critique from "community."

*Small Pleasures* repeatedly insists that people grouped under the designation "Chinese" are not, of course, homogeneous. Like most folks, Chinese have diverse pasts, financial circumstances, hopes and dreams — and values. This range, this specificity of experience, is measured out through characterization. Individuals embody communities, giving voice to conflicting experiences. Danny, the Canadian-born Chinese, reveals the effects of alienation in a white-dominated society. Wildly oscillating between denial and the "desire to know," Danny is trapped in a conundrum familiar to young second and third generation Chinese Canadians.

A small Hong Kong entrepreneur, Mr. Ying, is both a shrewd boss and landlord, while a faithful observer of Chinese traditions. Ying's restaurant provides a fitting backdrop for the interaction (and drama) of the protagonists. His character humorously indicates the excesses of Hong Kong style capitalism without, surprisingly, denigrating Hong Kong Chinese. His every appearance induces a smile, as his dialogue is "infected" by dollars.

Mainlanders, on the other hand, eke out an underground existence, paying a heavy price for admission. Wei opts for a contract marriage to remain in Canada and is battered by her husband. Mr. Li, Zhao and Sally get by by working illegally in Mr. Ying's restaurant and are, of course, financially exploited. Mr. Li, formerly a linguistics professor, (played by an actual linguistics professor from Beijing) left China to escape political persecution. Like many mainland professionals Li works as a waiter in Chinatown, living very humbly, experiencing extreme exile.

Zhao and Sally offer two variations on the Chinese female immigrant. Zhao constantly struggles between two cultures. She attempts the impossible, and refuses to relinquish the past, fearing "contamination" by non-Chinese values. She is tied to China by a fiancé whom she does not love but doesn't wish to disobey her father's will so she, eventually, resigns herself. Sally, on the other hand, in spite of her material conditions, adores the West. She takes the route of assimilation, replacing her Chinese name with Sally. Her goal is single-minded: marry a rich Canadian to facilitate faster and easier mobility into the mainstream Canadian social fabric. While at university, her dreams are realized in Jack,

a "white-bread" type medical student.

The dynamic interaction between and among these three categories of Chinese is always intriguing, often wittily executed. To make visible the marginalized experience of the mainlander the filmmaker utilizes comparison as a strategy. Lock's goal, to give a "non-exotic look at this part of the Chinese community" and "to promote deeper understanding between people" relies on an underlying realist aesthetic. The cast, according to Lock, was chosen to make "a more authentic film", and the narrative was based on "the true experiences of people known to the writer/director." The director's intentions, obviously motivated by a desire for self-representation, are to deliver a depiction of complex social relations in an accessible manner.

Lock's choice of access over experimentation is a more recent development, as he began his film career as an experimental filmmaker. But those halcyon days are over, for Lock and many others. The desire to communicate with a wider audience — to bridge Canadian and Chinese communities — compelled him to opt for the dramatic feature format. In this move towards a dramatic realist aesthetic Lock is somewhat of an anomaly, as younger Asian Canadian filmmakers, especially women, are moving in the opposite direction, towards formal innovation.

*Small Pleasures*, however, is hardly socialist realist. This is resoundingly brought home in the love scenes. Superbly art directed, these moments, although minimally executed, are charged with excess. At the same time, love is shadowed by political events in China. Zhao and Mr. Li's love affair is doomed to tragedy (in a Chinese sense), since it grew out of forced displacement, and the machinations of political power and bureaucracy in totalitarian China. Sally's liaison is directly placed within the events of Tiananmen Square. The exquisitely rendered love scene, intercut with Toronto's night life, is infused with urgently voiced broadcasts, replete with gun shots emitting from the square. Otherwise engaged, Sally appears disconcerted. The next morning when she walks to the window, indistinct waves of shouting waft into the room. These collective, youthful voices rise and fall, stand-ins for those braving the tanks and bullets on Beijing's streets. Although *Small Pleasures* shies away from political commentary (this for me is disappointing) these voices are exhilarating, connecting me to the spirit of Tiananmen Square. The effect is both ethereal, almost otherworldly, yet so convincingly "real" that





I am overcome with the moment's poignancy.

Although overwhelmingly connected to *Small Pleasures* and appreciative of its many strengths (and pleasures), I feel uncomfortable with Lock's claims to authenticity. The authenticity he seeks derives from an understandable corrective impulse—to replace "bad" old damaging stereotypes with new "good," more "realistic" images. Casting Beijingers to play Beijingers, Hong Kong actors to play Hong

Kong characters and assimilated C.B.C.'s (Canadian Born Chinese) to play characters who were born in Canada, although a compelling and innovative strategy to produce reality-effects, cannot overcome the mystifying powers of representation. The language of authenticity appeals to verisimilitude, and thus invites standards to measure against the "real." In order to produce our own counternarratives, in our search for "realness," it is essential that we try not to

replicate the problems inherent in realism—presence does not necessarily guarantee “truth.” This indeed adds to what has been deftly named “the burden of representation.” Agreeing with Edward Said that all representations are misrepresentations in one way or another, I do not have the inclination to engage in debates over realism that have resonances both here in Canada and in recent dialogue on race and representation, but given these claims for authenticity, I am troubled by some of the characterizations. The female characterizations fall dangerously close to all-too-familiar images of Asian women.

As a mainland Chinese woman I am very grateful for Lock’s efforts to bring my situation into focus, and he does this mostly successfully, but I fear these particular characterizations do not exceed Western conventions enough. From my perspective, Sally and Zhao do not radically differ from Hollywood stereotypes of Asian women. Both epitomize femininity; their dialogue is rife with girlish talk and giggles. Sally, in particular, exemplifies the “oriental” woman, although at times self-determined. She satisfies the Western male gaze in her “oriental” demeanor, continually seeking approval and appreciation from her “Canadian” boyfriend.

I am sure the director did not consciously construct a stereotype; as he states, the roles form a composite, forging real-life prototypes into characters. I believe the problem stems from casting. Actor Zhang Li may not be the best choice for the role of a modern Chinese woman who ventured alone into a foreign land. Her screen career began with a role in a Chinese television series adapted from the classical novel *The Dream in the Red Chamber*. She plays the daughter of an upper-class family in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), an ideal of femininity according to traditional, feudalist Chinese standards. It seems she can’t escape this role, as actor and character amalgamate in *Small Pleasures*. Given Li’s past career, it is ironic that she plays Sally, the film’s most committed character to Western values, and its most conventional “oriental woman.”

My one criticism of *Small Pleasures* lies with Sally’s character. The male characters, on the other hand, although allotted less screen time, exhibit more range than the female characters and exude vitality. This clarifies, for me, the question of perspective, that a sensitivity to racial origins, to a desire to “get it right” for ourselves demands a rigorous attention to differences: “difference within” includes the representation of gender. In this regard, *Small Pleasures* is almost there.

Since his CBC documentary on Chinatown, Keith Lock has explored the lived experiences of Chinese people in Canada. In this way, his contributions are groundbreaking. His celebrated *A Brighter Moon*, a short drama about the trials of two teenage boys from Hong Kong living in Toronto, is delightful and shares themes and techniques that are skillfully honed in *Small Pleasures*. (He has also produced a screenplay about Chinese-Canadian experience during the Second World War). *Small Pleasures* is a breakthrough, both as Lock’s first feature and Canada’s first Chinese-Canadian production. As a member of a marginal group, Lock, like many artists, works under double duty: the responsibility to faithfully represent his/her community to themselves and to “outsiders” through accessible means, and the obligation of the artist to experiment with his/her form while following their own vision. *Small Pleasures* successfully negotiates both.

*Small Pleasures* molds the multiplicity of Chinese-Canadian identity into a delicate, carefully rendered film, with the delicious pleasures of economy shaping its mise-en-scène. The result is as restrained as it is powerful. Although intended to embody the harsh encounter between mainland Chinese and late capitalist society, inhabiting the perilous territory of not-belonging, *Small Pleasures* indelibly suggests the process of becoming itself; it is a tale of transformation, of redefinition, of both self and Other.



# Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema.

BY ROBIN WOOD

## Editorial Dissent

*We publish this article under protest and would like to distance ourselves from the opinions expressed here which are, at best, idiosyncratic, at worst, offensive. It is included here as a concession to CineAction's self-publishing mandate. The author's disregard, in our opinion, for work in the area of race, both scholarly and larger lived historical struggles, particularly around self-definition, is woefully apparent. Notwithstanding the colour sensibilities of the author, we wouldn't be caught dead in pink. K.B. and D.F.*



Paul Robeson

I have never met a black person, and I am not white. I have known a number of brown persons (including one lover and one close friend), and I have met people who might 'pass for black' at a distance, but on closer view their skin reveals itself as a deep brown. I have tried, looking in the mirror, to define my own skin colour. It certainly isn't white (the only white people I've seen were in circuses): a pale beige, with a pink tinge, is the closest I can get. I also studied the collective at the last *CineAction* meeting, and reached a similar conclusion: none of us is white, we are all 'persons of colour.'

What language, today, is appropriate when we wish (for reasons that generally shouldn't exist) to speak of people of different skin colorations? The currently popular 'persons of colour' is useless for my present purposes, because it includes Asians, Native Americans, Hispanics..., none of whom are considered in this article. It is also, to me, curiously offensive: it implicitly defines the standard as 'white,' against which 'persons of colour' can be defined. As white people do not exist, such a standard is both insulting and misleading.

'White' and 'black' are peculiarly unfortunate, because of the way we automatically associate those terms with 'good' and 'evil.' (I'm sure 'white' supremacists have a commitment to exactly such an association of ideas, and play upon it surreptitiously: they would hate to have to think of themselves as 'pinkish beige'). And we need that

association: its basis, which appear to exist in all known cultures, and goes back through the centuries to the dawn of consciousness, is in the opposition of light and darkness, and has nothing properly to do with race whatever. One of the more ludicrous moments (and the competition is formidable) in my experiences of academia and the academic mentality occurred during the oral examination of an M. A. student I had been supervising. His thesis was on "Genre and Gender" in the Hollywood cinema, and two of the films it discussed were *The Pirate* and *Johnny Guitar*. In the middle of the examination, one highly respected member of the Film Department suddenly asked why the candidate had neglected to discuss the issue of racism. There was a moment of blank silence, while certain feverish thoughts rushed through my mind (an objection to Judy Garland playing a Hispanic, perhaps?). The learned film scholar then explained that his question referred to the facts that Gene Kelly's (or Walter Slezak's) pirate was called 'Mack the Black,' and Ernest Borgnine's character in *Johnny Guitar* was called 'Black Bart': clearly racist slurs. This happened many years ago, and I'm not sure now whether I actually, or merely should have, interpolated a question as to whether the Holy Sonnet of John Donne, written in England at the beginning of the 17th century, that begins 'O my blacke soule....' must now be considered racist. A farcical instance, of course, but it does bring home the desirability of separating, once and for all, the word 'black' from any racial connotations. (I can claim here the support of Spike Lee — see the scene in *Malcolm X* where Malcolm reads out the dictionary definitions of 'black').

I am not altogether happy with the terms 'brown' and 'pink' (I would like to live in a culture where pigmentation was not an issue), but they seem to me enormously preferable to 'black' and 'white,' so I propose to adopt them in the absence of anything better: besides avoiding the good/evil connotations, they have at least the merit of being less inaccurate. (I considered, of course, 'African American,' or 'persons of African descent,' but I have problems with that too: I might apply such terms to the slaves of *Mandingo*, but I can't think of, for example, Sybil in *The Reckless Moment* as an African American — the ties to any African culture being so remote — any more than I can think of the Joan Bennett character as a Euro-American: both women are simply Americans.)

### On Political Correctness

For a pink man, today, to write about the representation of brown persons is a hazardous undertaking. I undertake it, I hope, with a clear knowledge of the objections, and shall therefore begin by explaining why I think them invalid, and by asserting what I think I do and do not have the right to attempt.

I take it that the objections will closely parallel those I have often confronted when I call myself a feminist: 'Because you are a man, you cannot possibly understand.' It is of course true that I cannot feel entirely intimate with the specific forms and details of oppression that women experience daily. That does not disqualify me from being a feminist. The definition I am assuming here runs something like this: 'A person who understands that women

have been oppressed through the centuries, and still are, and who believes in the necessity for constructing a new society in which that oppression no longer exists, a project involving the radical re-education of most men and the radical transformation of all existing social structures.' With the obvious necessary changes, the same definition would do for 'anti-racist.' I am a male feminist and a pink anti-racist, and I write precisely from that position. As a male feminist I have never pretended to be a woman or to speak for women; as a pink anti-racist I do not pretend to be a person of colour or to speak for other races. That would indeed be presumptuous and insulting, since women and persons of colour, as their liberation within our culture proceeds, are perfectly able to speak for themselves, in their own voices. My own position, as a pink male, will inevitably be different, will include disagreements (I have, after all, my own culture to defend, in so far as it is defensible), but I hope not completely incompatible. From their own perspective, brown persons may be right in demanding the suppression of certain more or less distinguished works produced within pink culture but involving browns and raising issues of racism. From my perspective they are wrong. The important thing is to try to understand one another's perspective and accept that, from different starting-points, we are both working for the same end: the 'good community,' pluralist and multi-cultural, within which all discrimination on grounds of gender, race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, will cease to exist not only by order of law or human rights charters or other forms of enforcement (a necessary first step), but *in actuality*, in the way people relate and feel about each other.

However, my position may well seem incompatible to those who practise 'political correctness' in the extreme Orwellian forms it has now reached, where it appears to have as one of its projects the drastic rewriting or suppression of social history. An incident during a film course I taught last year revealed to me both the probable differences of position between a pink anti-racist and a brown, and the kind of 'tunnel vision' (understandable, perhaps, but scarcely admirable or helpful) that 'political correctness' has produced. A brown woman student, among the best in the class, whose work had been of a consistently high standard and with whom I had seen eye to eye on all other issues, wrote a paper on *The Reckless Moment* (one of the films I shall discuss later) attacking it for its presentation of the brown maid, Sybil. As I have always seen this as among the most intelligent, sensitive and progressive presentations of a brown character in a classical Hollywood movie, I was taken aback. I read and re-read the paper, and became aware of all its absences. There was no acknowledgement that the film was made in 1949 — no sense that it might reflect a social situation somewhat different from that reflected in the films of Spike Lee or John Singleton; no awareness of the social positions available to unmarried brown women in the United States in the late '40s; no sense of Sybil's position and significance in the film's structure (the character was never seen in context, or her function in the film discussed). The student's animus, in fact, was directed exclusively at the fact that a brown woman was occupying the role of servant.

Though sad (given the student's intelligence) such animus is of course understandable: as a gay man, I have



experienced a similar animus myself, often with as little justification. But I cannot see this as merely an isolated instance, fueled by a personal rage. It seems to me to belong very much to a cultural situation in which (in the province of Canada where I live) there are constant threats to ban *Huckleberry Finn* (in my view one of the dozen or so finest novels in the English — or American! — language) from the schools, and in which a proposed revival of *Show Boat* provokes widespread horror and outrage. The concept of 'political correctness' is, in principle, a beautiful and important one, while it remains flexible, fluid, continuously evolving. The moment it hardens into dogma, it becomes dangerous. (Precisely the same is true of Christianity, Marxism, Freudianism....) The danger is twofold: instead of being exploratory and questioning, subject to constant modification, open to argument, it rigidifies into something authoritarian and repressive; and it offers itself up for exploitation by the Right. The typical process here is that the Right produces, and seeks to enforce (usually succeeding, with the help of the capitalist media), a parody of the original which can then be used for purposes of satire. In the case of political correctness the Right has been saved even this much effort, as the parody is already there, readily available. The scent of the witch-hunt is in the air: the very people who would roundly denounce the practices of Joseph McCarthy appear completely unaware that, in principle if not so far in effect, they are pursuing a similar monstrous logic. And what kind of art can develop out of this? The ugly hectoring of a *Wind from the East*, perhaps, or the painting-by-numbers feminism of a *Gerda*.

As a gay pink anti-racist interested in film, I have tried to find an equivalent in the cinema for the 'objectionable' stereotyping of brown characters. I am aware that there are vast differences between the oppression of browns and the oppression of gays, but a certain parallelism can surely be claimed. A scene in *International House* (1993): W. C. Fields crashlands his plane in the middle of a hotel dining room in the mythical country of Woohoo. Attempting to discover where he is, he first asks a young blonde woman, who waggles her fingers at him and calls 'Woohoo.' Fields responds enthusiastically. Still, however, in ignorance, he asks the hotel receptionist, played by Franklin Pangborn. Pangborn (the Stepan Fetchit of gay culture) also replies 'Woohoo.' Fields (who is wearing a carnation in his lapel) gives him a look, and growls in his inimitable way, 'Don't let the posy fool you.' From the viewpoint of political correctness, how should I react to this moment? Presumably with rage and disgust, accompanied by a demand that the film no longer be shown: it does not conform to what are called 'contemporary standards' of awareness and enlightenment; it reinforces a gay stereotype; it exploits gayness as a subject for humour and ridicule. I find the moment hilarious, perhaps the high point of a frequently very funny little movie. Partly this inappropriate reaction is due to the pleasure of the confrontation of two highly skilled and incongruously mismatched comedians in the characterizations they perfected from long practice. The humour lies partly in the notion that anyone, even Franklin Pangborn at his twittiest, would perceive W. C. Fields as a sex object, and in Fields' idiosyncratic description of a single carnation as a

'posy,' such as is carried by bridesmaids or presented by a lover to his beloved. There is also the shock of so open a joke about homosexuality, an openness that would become impossible a year later when the Motion Picture Code began to be strictly enforced and all references to homosexuality became taboo. But my pleasure, as a gay man, is made possible by my knowledge that this moment belongs to the past: I am not threatened by the stereotype Pangborn embodied, because I know it to be obsolete, like that embodied by Stepan Fetchit. Were the film remade today (perhaps with Eddie Murphy in the Fields role) I would probably find the scene offensive, because people can now reasonably be expected to be more aware of the implications: it would inevitably carry overtones of deliberate malice. It is the complete absence of malice, the essential innocence and good humour, of the original, that permits one to be charmed. Was it socially harmful in 1993, by reinforcing conventional attitudes to gays? I suppose so, if one really wants to make a point of it. But as that is something we can't possibly do anything about now, the question seems academic.

Another example, somewhat different but no less relevant: I am an agnostic, and I am opposed to all organized religions, which (especially when they fuse with some form of militant nationalism) are responsible for so much of the needless misery and suffering in the world. Yet it has never occurred to me that I should therefore renounce the music of Bach, or boycott performances of the B minor Mass, a work I listen to with awe and delight at least once a year. This is obviously about as politically incorrect as you can get. On the other hand, I cannot see, if the logic is followed through rigorously, what works from the past we would be able to preserve. Should we not destroy Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, because Mary is painted as European and clearly does not conform to our contemporary notions of radical feminism? One of the consequences, when a concept like 'political correctness' hardens into dogma, is that all sense of the complexity of issues has to be suppressed.

A few decades ago I used to read *Little Black Sambo* to my children: it was one of the books they requested most frequently. We thought the names the author gave her characters pretty silly (no one is really called Black Jumbo and Black Mumbo), but I explained that the book was written a long time ago when pink people thought it was amusing to give brown people funny names, a concept which a reasonably intelligent three-year-old has no difficulty in assimilating. I was delighted at the ease with which my kids were able to identify with the problems, sorrows and triumphs of an intelligent, resilient and resourceful hero who happened to be 'black.' There was no question of condescension or distance: as I reread the familiar story, they were *Little Black Sambo*. The book of course is no longer obtainable.

### **Nowness and the Past**

'If we lose the past, we lose the future' —  
William D. MacGillivray

As currently practised, political correctness seems intimately connected with nowness: the cult of the pre-

sent, the sense that, if we don't now know *everything*, we at least know *better*, and can therefore dispense with the past, which was populated exclusively by all those unfortunate benighted people who didn't. What should matter to us is not what we think of Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Beethoven (if we're truly enlightened we don't think of them at all), but the latest video show or specimen of performance art, the latest documentary on our contemporary preoccupations. Similarly, the vast majority of our critics seem obsessed with the latest happenings, the latest theories, the latest -isms, presumably on the assumption that the latest must be the best, the truest (especially if it flatters them): they subscribe, in other words to the most naive notion of 'progress.' We should, of course, all strive to be aware of our environment, our cultural 'moment,' and be ready to commit ourselves to anything we find that appears convincingly to point forward to a richer culture and a more just society. It is certainly true that in certain respects we have reached an awareness denied to previous generations, which is what makes contemporary life so exciting and permits us what little hope is still possible: we know about feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, etc.. All this is fine, so long as it is accompanied by a sense of proportion, perspective, distance, critical judgement, and a sense of and respect for the past from which our current awareness derives.

Like everyone else who either was born or chooses to live in the West, I am heir to an extremely rich and complex, and continuously evolving, cultural tradition, a tradition enriched and modified by its encounters with other traditions, a tradition that can embrace contradictions, containing everything from Hildegard von Bingen to Cowboy Junkies, or from *Birth of a Nation* to *Boyz n the Hood*. Unlike many of my contemporaries I feel enriched by my inheritance, and want neither to ignore it or sweep it aside contemptuously. I grew out of it, and carry it all the time within me. It nurtures me even as I feel the need to be critical of it, to make discriminations, to take my necessary distance. For me, the most important work that needs to be done today is in response to the question of how we relate to the past: how — after feminism, after anti-racism, after the interrogation of gender and sexuality — how do we listen to Mozart and Mahler, look at Leonardo and Rembrandt, watch Ford and Ophüls? To me these figures are both historical and contemporary: they can be understood only within their historical moment, but they continue to speak to me today, as my intimates. I cannot imagine what life would be without them: desperately impoverished, certainly. To specify one example: *Cost fan Tutte* is obviously in many respects not, by our current standards, 'politically correct,' but if there is a more searching, suggestive, complex and provocative examination of sexual politics in any contemporary art form I am not aware of it.

What will be left if the dominance of this union of political correctness and nowness continue to its logical conclusion? Presumably nothing that was produced more than a decade or so ago, and even that will become politically incorrect in its turn and have to be abandoned. *Show Boat* today, *The Magic Flute* tomorrow, the complete works of John Ford the day after, jettisoned as no more than objectionable reminders of past errors best forgotten.

But why stop there at the obvious? Can any work of the past measure up to our current enlightenment? What shocks me most is that so few seem offended by such a prospect: many will answer my question with an indifferent shrug and 'So what?' My sense of appalling loss, of totally irresponsible and incomprehending waste, seems to be shared by only an embattled few beyond the confines of academia.

And we can no longer look to academia with much hope. For most of those academics who still profess to care about the past, all passion was spent long ago, and they teach it because their careers depend upon it. Otherwise, political correctness and nowness reign supreme. Since I retired I have kept an eye on what has been happening within the little mini-department of Film Studies I developed over fifteen years. There has been an attempt by my successor (stalled, apparently, but for how long?) to do away with the course on Hollywood I established as one of the curriculum's major pillars, and replace it with a Media Studies course in which the works of Ford, Hitchcock, Land, etc., will be presented on the same level as subway advertisements and TV sitcoms, as so much ideological fodder for deconstruction. And the postings for applications for all teaching posts now carry the stipulation (not yet 'Required,' it is true, but 'Preferred') that applicants for all film courses (including, for example, a course on 'Genre Study') shall be able to demonstrate expertise in 'non-Eurocentric' studies. ('Non-Eurocentric' does not, apparently, include the United States.) My successor's latest achievement has been to arouse her class to a veritable orgy of misplaced outrage: an article in the student paper, signed jointly by her students and herself, denouncing *Show Boat* as racist propaganda without the slightest regard for social context or social history. I do not know whether to assume that the students were or were not familiar with *Show Boat* (the novel, the films, the stage show): to assume that they were would be to insult their intelligence, to assume they were not would be to question their honesty. The article ends with the following: '...the government of the day must take full responsibility to protect its citizens from racist aggression. The "Show-Boat" is strengthening the ideology of racism. It must be stopped.' It never occurred to me that I was relinquishing my post to a person who would advocate government censorship of the Arts. She certainly deserves credit for carrying political correctness to its logical conclusion, though the accompanying article, in its hysteria and irrationality, evokes not so much the witch-hunt as the lynch mob.

As to the past and its products, the question, as I see it, is not so much what to keep and what to discard (we must keep *everything*), but how to use it. The moment that a work of art or a cultural artifact (anything from a Beethoven quartet to a beer commercial) is produced and made public it offers itself up for use, and the use we make of it is up to us. We should never be intimidated by art, even the greatest art. We are not bound by some law to accept anything at face value, as its makers intended: we are at liberty to use it in ways directly contrary to the discernible intentions. Take, as an extreme case, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. I cannot think of a film I loathe more, but it seems to me of great value — of



great usability. Not at all for the reason offered by liberal critics — that, although it is ideologically objectionable, it is also 'great art.' On the contrary, its art and its politics fit so perfectly as to be inseparable. It demonstrated that when you divorce the montage techniques developed by Eisenstein and Vertov from their constructivist/dialectical base, all you are left with is a kind of grandiose painting-by-numbers (the film, after all, is a model of political correctness, given its time and place), aesthetically boring and empty, and is distasteful as the speeches it records. But we can learn more about Nazism — its social and psychological basis, its aesthetics, its mechanisms, its hideous power — from *Triumph of the Will* than we can from *Night and Fog* (a film I admire, while regretting its refusal of analysis). Teachers who wish their students not merely to deplore Nazism but to understand it have indispensable teaching material here, especially if the film is used in conjunction with Stuart Marshall's fine (and thoroughly analytical) documentary *Desire*. Riefenstahl provides an example of the purely negative value of a cultural product. All the works I propose to discuss here seem to me to possess, to very varying degrees, positive value, though of them only *Mandingo* could be claimed to conform to our notions of political correctness.

My work as a film critic and teacher has been structured by two guiding principles, which many seem to find incompatible but to me they are complementary: neither would be valid without the other. 1. To do everything that I can, within my field of expertise, to promote radical social and political change. 2. To re-examine and reinterpret, from a strongly positive viewpoint, the works of the past, in order to determine what of our cultural tradition remains vital and can continue to be used progressively. As I have said elsewhere, critical discrimination is not crude matter of separating out a small pantheon of immortal masterpieces and dismissing the rest. Essentially exploratory and always tentative, it is frequently a matter of making subtle discriminations within works: distinctions between what is creative, vital and progressive, and what is inert and 'conventional' in the bad sense, the mere detritus of the culture. I shall focus centrally on the presentation of the figure and function of the brown female servant in four classical Hollywood films, prefacing this with a discussion of *Show Boat* (the novel and the two available film versions), and close with some remarks on *Mandingo*. I have explained that I am writing from the position, not of a brown person, but of a pink anti-racist. There are important differences between these positions, which need briefly to be spelt out.

It seems likely (though by no means certain) that a brown critic will be primarily (and understandably) concerned with the images of browns available in the cinema, with a view to demanding and promoting positive images (paralleling the valuable work of the late, and sorely missed Vito Russo in gay culture). This is not my primary concern here, any more than a corresponding demand for positive images of gays and lesbians has structured my other critical writings. My primary concern is with structures: the structures of the culture, that give rise to the struggles and conflicts within it; the structures of films

that, on the level of ideology, reflect those struggles and conflicts, sometimes constructively, sometimes progressively. I no longer see much profit in singling out, privileging, one area of struggle over another. Such privileging tends to separate rather than unify, to insist upon differences rather than common ends, and I believe that the only hope our civilization has left (at times it seems a remote one) is in the unification of all the existing components into a united Left: the workers, the poor, the unemployed, the homeless; feminists; racial minorities; gays and lesbians; environmentalists. The common enemies that should unite all these groups remain what they have always been, patriarchy and capitalism. In other words, cosmetic alterations (which each group, taken separately, seems to want) — give a little here to feminists, a little here to browns and other non-pinks, a little here to gays and lesbians, reduce a minimal amount of pollution to pacify the environmentalists — are not in the long run going to save us. It is precisely what it looks like: pacification. We have to fight to 'Change everything, now,' and that battle can only be won by a unified Left ready to strike at the very roots of the capitalist/patriarchal system. It is simply too late to do anything but accept our differences and grasp that, although real enough, they are trivial in relation to what is at stake.

### Show Boat

The immediate provocation for beginning with *Show Boat* will be lost on most non-Canadian readers, so a brief account is in order. Our famous/notorious/infamous local impresario, Garth Drabinsky (whom I hope I shall not be interpreted as celebrating), has announced a new revival of *Show Boat* to launch a new theatre, and the proposal has been vociferously attacked on the grounds of the musical's political incorrectness, the attack including a demand for the show's cancellation. I shall pass over, whilst briefly recognizing, the irony of this: that the plot involves the threat of bigots to suppress the show within it on the grounds that its cast includes persons of 'negro blood.' I am not concerned here with the question of whether, in the present climate of racial tensions, *Show Boat* should or should not be staged in Toronto. I can personally see no good reason why it should but no good reason why it shouldn't. What does concern me is the opprobrium that has been heaped upon the work, in all its manifestations (novel, stage show, movie). It goes without saying, I hope, that an approach that starts from a sense of social history must (here and elsewhere) take into account two historical periods: that in which the work is set and that in which it was made.

### 1. The Novel

It is customary today in Toronto for Edna Ferber's novel to be described by pink liberals as 'trash' and by brown militants as 'hate literature.' It is a question how many of those who denounce it (pink or brown) have actually read it: one of the convenient characteristics of 'political correctness' is that it is unnecessary to dirty yourself by reading or viewing the works you condemn: they are known to be objectionable. (It is instructive that most

Christian Fundamentalists seem to share the same assumption.) It seems to me a splendid book, to which neither extant film version has done justice, both deriving from the intermediate stage version. Music plays an important role in the novel, but its transformation into a 'musical' has had severe consequences. The worst of these is perhaps that a 'musical' demands a leading romantic tenor and a traditional 'formation of the heterosexual couple' happy ending: Gaylord Ravenal is indulged in the films to a degree quite at odds with Ferber's firmly critical 'placing' of the character. It is not really paradoxical that Ferber's Gaylord is easier to find minimally sympathetic, however unpleasant: we surely reject the films' invitation to find him irresistible solely because he can sing like Allan Jones or Howard Keel. The novel's powerful feminist thrust evaporated in the films, where the message of 'Can't help loving that man of mine' supercedes the novel's abrupt ejection of Gaylord from the narrative ('She never saw him again') in favour of having Magnolia, manless and none the worse for it, inherit the show boat (site of the 'happy family,' a.k.a. the harmonious multi-racial community) from her powerful mother, and go it alone.

The book is not 'about' race: the brown characters play a very minor (though in one respect crucial) role, as little more than figures in the social background. This appears to be one of the main current objections to the novel: that Edna Ferber, a bourgeois pink woman writing primarily for women of her class and race in the 1920s, ought to have written a book singlemindedly committed to brown militancy and political correctness in the 1990s. Of course, it would be wonderful if she had done so. Wouldn't the fact that this was totally impossible — literally unthinkable — be taken into account?

The novel's status as 'hate literature' can be fairly represented by the following:

Mrs. Hawks, bustling into the show-boat kitchen with her unerring gift for scenting an atmosphere of mellow enjoyment, and dissipating it, would find Magnolia perched on a chair, both elbows on the table, her palms propping her chin as she regarded with round-eyed fascination Qweenie's magic manipulations. Or perhaps Jo, the charming and shiftless, would be singing for her one of the Negro plantation songs, wistful with longing and pain; the folk songs of a wronged race, later to come into a blaze of popularity as spirituals.

If that were written today about contemporary brown persons, one might well wish to protest against the 'demeaning stereotypes' and the way the brown characters' social position is taken for granted. In the context of social history I cannot see that it even deserves that criticism: what social positions were available to recently emancipated slaves in the near aftermath of the Civil War, and what degree of awareness of and empathy for brown history might one reasonably expect from a popular bourgeois pink novelist in the 1920s? If we label this 'hate literature', what term have we left to describe the speeches of Hitler, white supremacist pamphlets, or the lunatic mouthings of the Klan?

Though no more politically correct in relation to feminism than to racial politics, the novel deserves an honourable place in the literature of the women's movement

— set, in Ferber's own words, in a period when 'the modern business woman had not yet begun her almost universal battle against the male in her own field'. (Any doubt that this claim is justified would be dispelled by a reading of Chapter XV). Ferber's theme is the evolution of Magnolia's consciousness and the heredity of women's strength passed down through the novel's three generations. Racial issues, and the brown characters, are subordinated to, but also integrated in, this theme. Julie's role is far smaller in the book than in the two film versions — she is present less in her own right than for her influence on Magnolia — but Ferber's treatment of the miscegenation subplot seems to me exemplary: she expresses, and we are led to feel, not the slightest shock at the revelation of Julie's 'negro blood' and the fact that her mother was brown. The conventional horrified reaction is put into the mouth of the shallow, trivial Elly, the book's only completely unsympathetic female character. Julie's departure, given us through the eyes of Magnolia (who in the novel is still a child at this stage), is overwhelming, culminating in the farewell embrace after Magnolia strikes and breaks away from her repressive mother and rushes after the woman she has grown to love:

'And when finally they came together, the woman dropped on her knees in the dust of the road and gathered the weeping child to her and held her close, so that as you saw them sharply outlined against the sunset the black of the woman's dress and the white of the child's frock were as one.'

Hate literature?

Although they remain minor figures, it is the influence of the brown characters that plays the decisive role in Magnolia's destiny in the novel's climactic scene. Financially ruined and then abandoned by the feckless Gaylord, Magnolia desperately tries to get work as a singer, her only talent. Everything depends upon her audition:

She removed her hat and veil. A sallow big-eyed young woman, too thin, in a well-made suit and a modish rather crumpled shirtwaist and nothing of the look of the stage about her. She thumbed the instrument again. She remembered something dimly, dimly, far, far back; far back and yet very recent; this morning, "don't smile too often. But if you ever want anything..." [Julie's first words to her, as a child].

She smiled. The thin young man did not appear overwhelmed. She threw back her head then as Jo had taught her, half closed her eyes, tapped time with the right foot, smartly. Imitative in this, she managed, too, to get into her voice that soft and husky Negro quality which for years she had heard on river boats, bayous, landings...

She gets the job.

One is aware today of the possible objections to that: that the brown characters are in the book not in their own right but merely to contribute to the development of the pink heroine; that they are stereotyped by being related to certain types of music and performance; that the passage exemplifies the pink race's appropriation of brown culture. There seems to me some confusion here. Though I once knew a brown university professor who regarded jazz as degrading, embodying everything he was trying to escape,



I cannot believe that most brown persons would wish to renounce their past and its great cultural achievements. Or, if the objection is to the appropriation, is it really so terrible that a number of pink musicians were thrilled by jazz and blues, and wished to identify themselves, in all humility, with brown culture? Should I, in turn, object to the appropriation of pink culture by browns? - to the fact that Robeson played Othello, that Marian Anderson sang Schubert, or that her nephew James de Priest has become perhaps the greatest living interpreter of the Shostakovich symphonies? If what we want is a true multi-racial community, should we not be prepared to share everything?

## 2. The Films

*Show Boat* the musical is seriously flawed, but James Whale's 1936 version (confused and confusing as its mixed messages must strike us) offers some potentially fruitful suggestions as to what might still be done with it. The grounds for the objections of those wanting positive images or role-models of brown people are clear enough, but valid only with quite strenuous qualification. The main brown characters Jo (Paul Robeson) and Queenie (Hattie McDaniel) correspond in outline to familiar stereotypes (the 'lazy nigger', the devoted female servant); the pink heroine with her archetypally 'white' name (Magnolia/Irene Dunne) actually performs in grotesque 'nigger minstrel' blackface in what I suppose is today the film's most embarrassing scene (of which more later); the 'mulatto' Julie (Helen Morgan) ends up an abandoned alcoholic nobly sacrificing herself for the 'pure' heroine before conventionally disappearing from the narrative without trace or comment.

So to the strenuous qualifications. Whale was a director with every reason to be sensitive to the realities of oppression: his refusal to conceal his gay identity cost him his career and perhaps his life. (His work is in urgent need of reevaluation from this viewpoint, though unfortunately key movies are lost or inaccessible). *Show Boat*'s 'lazy nigger' of the first half is paralleled clearly enough with the far more reprehensible lazy pink 'hero' of the second, Gaylord/Allan Jones, the irresponsible gambler who fails even to be on hand for the birth of his daughter and his wife's near death. The contrast is succinctly established in that very sequence: the 'lazy' Jo instantly springs into action and risks his life to fetch Gaylord from his pleasures during a ferocious storm. There is more to be said about the brown stereotypes (but all the characters are stereotypes, surely an accepted convention of the melodrama). Jo's laziness (not presented as an innate racial characteristic, as it is accompanied by an immense energy when this is called for) and Queenie's industriousness are significant in relation to each other. Jo's work, in the 'man's world', is the ignominious alienated labour of a near-slave. (One might draw an obvious parallel with that other popular stereotype of laziness, the British labourer, commonly characterized as sitting around drinking cups of tea when he ought to be digging up roads or building new houses for the bourgeoisie). It seems a simple step to interpret such 'laziness' as a logical form of resistance (not necessarily conscious). If the film sets it against Queenie's enthusiasm for their work, this is because the latter operated with-

in the context of a community of women of which she is an accepted member, giving her labour direct meaning for herself as well as for her employers. Such a reading of Jo's laziness is not merely implicit in the material. It is made quite explicit in the stunning sequence that no one who has seen the film can ever forget: Robeson's singing of 'Ol' Man River' (surely among the great American songs) and the accompanying montage with which Whale visualized the words. Robeson's presence (physically and morally charismatic) is crucial, and repeatedly (sometimes wordlessly) used as a commentary on social injustice: in his show boat costume (done up as a sort of glorified usher, to lend 'local colour'), he has only to stand as a silent witness of events and persons he can neither control nor affect, to speak more eloquently than words. It is also this presence that lends such force and poignance to his farewell to Julie, the woman cut off by her birth from both the pink world and his. This aspect of the film has no equivalent in either the novel or the later film version: one must attribute it to Whale, and to his creative collaboration with Robeson, most of the effects being achieved through the mise-en-scene.

It is the project of the film's first movement (prior to the catastrophe of Julie's exposure and departure) to suggest the possibility, thwarted by both class and racial bigotry, of a utopian multi-cultural community. As Richard Dyer has argued ('Entertainment and Utopia', *Movie 24*), it is often the function of musical numbers (enabled precisely by the breach with 'realism' and all pretense of verisimilitude) to express the utopian desire the characters cannot fulfill in their lives; *Show Boat* offers a magnificent example. In his promotional speech, Captain Andy (Charles Winninger) describes the show boat troupe as 'one big happy family': he repeats the phrase ironically after his snobbish and puritanical wife upbraids him for allowing their daughter Magnolia (or 'Nola') to consort with the entertainers: 'Where I come from no decent body would touch this show boat riff-raff with a ten-foot pole'. Shortly after this (the 'Ol' Man River' sequence, with its emphatic denunciation of pink society's exploitation of browns, intervenes) comes 'Can't help loving that man of mine'. Julie, in the show boat kitchen, locus of the female community, begins it as Nola's instigation. Queenie enters the image behind Julie's back ('How come y'all know that song?' - which only 'coloured folks' sing). As Julie continues, a shot frames the three women, pink, brown, and of mixed blood, uniting them. Jo enters in the background, commenting with a knowing laugh that it's his 'favourite song' (as well it might be - perhaps it should be boycotted for encouraging the self-oppression of married women!). Queenie's version (beginning, in retaliation, 'My man is shiftless...') follows, and initiates a communal celebration, with Nola shuffle-dancing (expressing her ease in identifying with brown culture), the other three singing, miraculously joined by an off-screen chorus revealed in a subsequent shot as the brown community on the shore. Nola then leads the shuffle-dance outside on deck, followed (in that order) by Queenie, Julie and Jo. The celebration is brutally interrupted by her mother, spokesperson for class and racial prejudice, and the 'good community' instantly breaks up.

The first (and successful) half of the movie culminates

in the agonizing scene of Julie's exposure as a product of miscegenation. Steve, her husband, cuts her thumb with his pocket-knife and sucks her blood, so that he can swear before witnesses that he has 'negro blood' in him also. Jo watches, silent, from a gallery above, powerless to intervene. Nola expresses her passionate commitment to Julie, and Julie refuses her kiss, expressing her socially indoctrinated sense of her own contamination: a sense clearly not shared by the film, which unambiguously endorses Nola here. Jo is given the last word of farewell, and the sequence ends with a crane-shot up to him, fragments of 'Ol' Man River' on the soundtrack. The film never recovers from that scene.

I would certainly agree that *Show Boat* has a serious problem — crippling, in my opinion — which the 1936 film version (to its credit) greatly magnifies; but the problem has nothing directly to do with the treatment of race. It is basically that the assault in the first half on bigotry and its consequences is so strong and so disturbing that it's quite impossible to readjust to the relatively trivial and banal conjugal problems of the pink characters on which the second half is centred. Helen Morgan's rendition of 'Bill' is justly famous as one of the film's highlights, but it is an isolated moment, the only scene in the second half in which Julie appears, and the subsequent and abrupt explosion of her from the narrative is unforgivable: it is her fate that we care about, and beside it that of the wretched Gaylord dwindles into insignificance. (The 1951 remake seems to acknowledge this by casting Ava Gardner as Julie against Kathryn Grayson's Nola; at least Helen Morgan had Irene Dunne as counterweight). The problem is not that the film's treatment of race is objectionable but that it is so powerful that the filmmakers were quite unable (in the context of a musical to follow it through (it is significant that Robeson, as well as Morgan, virtually disappears from the second half)). I submit, however, that if *Show Boat* is to be revived or remade today, there is a drastic but very simple remedy: return to the original novel, but go slightly beyond it. Jettison Gaylord (who deserves it) instead of Julie (who doesn't); let Julie and Nola meet and reaffirm their commitment to one another; close the narrative with the celebration of their sisterhood, joined by Nola's daughter Kim, and of course Queenie. This is not merely 'politically correct' — it is the logical conclusion of what the first half of Whale's film sets up, and does no violence whatever to the structure. A brief note on Nola's 'blackface' number (which I certainly concede is today difficult to watch). Its primary function (in relation to the earlier shuffle-dance) is surely to reaffirm Nola's readiness to identify with browns — and in 1936 the 'nigger minstrel' show was surely not perceived as the degrading and insulting performance we see it as today. The film (or James Whale?) was, however, evidently already uneasy about this: in the middle of Nola's number we get a marvellous, subversive, disorienting cut to a back view of the segregated brown audience in the upper gallery watching, silent and motionless, a pink woman in black makeup cavort about on the stage in a 'jolly negro' song.

The 1951 remake can be quickly dispensed with. It can be read as a thoroughly misguided attempt to remedy

the structural defects of the Whale version by toning down everything that was strong in it. The racial theme, although it cannot be eliminated, is reduced to a minimum. 'Can't help loving that man of mine' becomes a solo for Ava Gardner to lip-sync to Nola; the miscegenation scene has little of the impact of the earlier film: the brown characters' roles are drastically abridged (Queenie scarcely appears, and Jo is trundled on to sing 'Ol' Man River' as a set-piece). It does bring Julie back for the closing sequences (doubtless because of Gardner's 'star' status), but only to perform the ignominious function of reuniting the pink nuclear family, a noble task of highly dubious benefit to anyone for which she is not even accorded recognition. That the pink nuclear family is here represented by Howard Keel, Kathryn Grayson, and one of the most obnoxious little girls in the history of child actors, merely underlines the sense of emptiness. This 1951 *Show Boat* is scuttled by its cast, not because they are uniformly inferior (aside from the indestructible Gardner — and she is not better than Helen Morgan — they include Agnes Moorehead), but because of the characteristic clumsiness and insensitivity of George Sidney, who will be remembered as the director who, given the opportunity to work with both Rita Hayworth and Kim Novak in the same film *Pal Joey*, bungled it more thoroughly than one would have thought possible. The film's one stroke of brilliance is to juxtapose Julie's departure with the singing of 'Ol' Man River', and that is already suggested in the Whale version.

### A Note on the 'N' Word

'Niggers all work while the white folks play' seems to me one of the great protest lines in the history of 'entertainment', and I want to argue that it is weakened when the offending word is softened (to 'darkies' in the Whale version, a change commonly attributed to Robeson, though it is also sung by the chorus over the opening credits) or eliminated ('We all work ...'). Edna Ferber was demonstrably aware of the word's offensiveness in the 1920s: she nowhere uses it in her own voice, as narrator, consistently preferring 'negro' (then acceptable), and puts it almost exclusively in the mouths of characters who are discredited (and who in any case belong of the nineteenth century). One may suppose that Richard Rodgers was therefore also aware of this, and gave the word to Jo quite deliberately. All it needs is to be emphasized, with irony and anger: 'Niggers (that's what they call us...)'. Without it, much of the force of the line is lost.

(The second part will follow in a later issue).

(This article is dedicated, in brotherhood, to Robert K. Lightning. He is currently working on a detailed response, from the perspective of a brown critic, which will appear in a future issue.)

I wish to thank the Ontario Arts Council for their generous support.



# C O N T R I B U T O R S

---

**Reece Augiste**

is the director of two internationally acclaimed films, *Twilight City* and *Mysteries of July* and is a member of the British-based Black Audio Film Collective. He is also a writer and has lectured in numerous institutions including Warwick University, Geneva University and California Institute of Fine Arts. He is currently working on a dramatic feature script.

**Kass Banning**

is a Toronto critic and writer. She currently teaches cultural studies at York University.

**Ron Burnett**

is Director of the Graduate Programme in Communications at McGill University in Montreal. He is the editor of *Explorations in Film Theory* (Indiana), and author of numerous publications.

**David Fujiwara**

is an architect, film buff and a person of some colour.

**Gabrielle Hezekiah**

is pursuing graduate studies in Sociology in Education at O.I.S.E.. She has worked in film and video distribution and is interested in work by black women.

**Isaac Julien**

lives in London where he works as a film director. He has recently completed a short film *The Attendant* for Channel 4 Television, his 1992 two part documentary series *Black and White in Colour* for BBC2 TV was shown in the 1992 New York Film Festival. His feature *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) gained the International Critics week prize in Cannes. *Looking For Langston* (1989) his prize-winning short film on Langston Hughes was recently broadcast in a 20 minute version on PBS, on the Alive From Off Centre, Arts programme. He also lectures and writes on issues of black cultural politics, film, art and sexuality.

**Xiaoping Li**

is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at York University. She is currently working on contemporary Chinese art, culture and politics in China and the diaspora.

**Kobena Mercer**

Assistant Professor in Art History and History of Consciousness programs at University of California Santa Cruz, was formerly Research Projects Officer at the British Film Institute, London. He studied Fine Art at St. Martins School of Art (B.A., 1981) and Sociology at University of London, Goldsmiths' College (Ph.D., 1990) and has published widely in cultural studies, editing *Black Film/British Cinema* for the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1988 and co-editing a special issue of *Screen* with film-maker Isaac Julien. He grew up in Ghana and England and currently lives in Los Angeles.

**Darrel Moore**

teaches political theory and Cultural Studies at Swarthmore College.

**Deborah Root**

teaches at the Ontario College of Art and is currently at work on a project that addresses questions of appropriation and power entitled *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*.

**Robert Stam**

is Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, and the author of *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* (Columbia), *Brazilian Cinema* (with Randall Johnson), *Subversive Pleasures* (John Hopkins) and, with Sandy Fitterman-Lewis and Bob Burgoyne, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (Routledge). The article published in *CineAction* will form part of a book co-authored with Ella Shohat entitled *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multicultural Studies in the Media Age*, forthcoming from Routledge.

**Robin Wood**

is completing his last book of film criticism.

